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HOW TO CITE:

Adams R, Soudien C. Introduction: Radical Reason. *S Afr J Sci.* 2022;118(Special issue: Radical Reason), Art. #15000. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2022/15000>

Introduction: Radical Reason

The state of the social sciences and humanities

This special issue of the *South African Journal of Science* arises out of a selection of key contributions made in Pretoria at the Science Forum South Africa held in December 2020. The Science Forum is a platform developed by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) for the purpose of convening the country's leading scientists, scholars and intellectuals around the questions of economic, social, cultural and technological development. Driving the initiative is the desire to bring the knowledge-producing community into a simultaneously open yet rigorous intellectual space. It is about critically exploring the best of what is known in the sciences, through and with the advantage of multidisciplinary perspectives, to understand how the issues which trouble the world – chiefly those of social inequality and planetary sustainability – can be approached through insightful enquiry, and how solutions may be proposed which offer pathways to new futures which are just, equitable and sustainable.

While the issues of social justice and equity have framed all seven previous iterations of the Science Forum, the 2020 occasion foregrounded the work of the humanities and the social sciences in South Africa, formalised through a partnership between DSI and a consortium of institutions of the social sciences and humanities led by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Prompting this focus were two important issues. The first was the 50th anniversary of the HSRC and the 90th anniversary of its predecessor, the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research. The anniversary, conceptualised and given form by a consortium of leading figures and institutions in the science and humanities fields inside and outside of the country – including the heads of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), Universities South Africa, and the International Science Council, and the heads of several Humanities Faculties throughout the country (the Consortium) – was marked by a year-long series of public events, colloquia and exhibitions. The shared understanding of the Consortium was that the occasion of the HSRC's anniversary provided South Africa with an important opportunity to interrogate the role of the social sciences and the humanities in working with the multiple developmental challenges of South Africa and the world. Also recognised was that the occasion offered opportunities to understand a range of important questions about the state of scholarship and research in South Africa, and the relationship of the social sciences and the humanities with what are oftentimes called the 'hard sciences'. This includes the contention, in the context of the decolonisation movement around the world, that the dominant scientific project, shaped by the Global North, was in crisis and was not – in particular – able to deal with the compounding challenges of global inequality and climate change; that scientific discourse had become over-determined by technology, the hubris of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its accompanying artificial intelligence conceit; and, not least of all, the concern that precisely at the moment in which the social sciences and humanities should be playing a key role in generating understandings of the critical changes affecting the world – with critical reference here to the COVID-19 pandemic, still looming large in December 2020 – they were largely absent and unresponsive.

The crisis of COVID-19 was the second reason for foregrounding the social sciences and humanities at the 2020 Science Forum. Indeed, the pandemic was not simply a scientific and biomedical question, but had deep implications for how people lived as both individuals and communities, how they managed their livelihoods and how they could begin the process of cultivating social imaginations of compassion, care and solidarity in the face of worldwide retreats into self-serving nationalisms, and ethnically and racially defined self-preservational forms of isolationism. The importance of addressing COVID-19 as an interdisciplinary issue with substantial social science input has been stressed in another recent special issue of this Journal (<https://sajs.co.za/issue/view/1024>), and in part this latest special issue takes that work forward. Following the events of the onset of COVID-19 – which are yet to fully unfold – the acute conditions of inequality that the pandemic exacerbated in societies across the world demanded that the social sciences and the humanities were taken more seriously. There was, it was understood, much to be done to better understand the production of inequality, and how inequality continued to arise in new ways and with new effects. This is the critical role of the social sciences and of the humanities.

This special issue, it is important to clarify, keeps in mind both the prompts which informed the shaping of the Science Forum. It is, however, the state of the social sciences and the humanities which figures most prominently here. While the special issue brings the questions of the place of the 'hard sciences' into play, it is the concern with the responsibilities of the social sciences and the humanities which this special issue explores most fully.

This concern arises out of the need to understand, historically, the point and place at which the social sciences and humanities find themselves. The occasion of the HSRC's anniversary is, as a consequence, more than simply fortuitous. It is timely. It is timely because it is in the substance and character of a key state institution of the social sciences such as the HSRC that the country might come to understand what role its social scientists and humanities scholars might play in the development of the country.

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that the birth and history of the HSRC in 1969 are deeply entwined with the project of apartheid. A central figure in the establishment of the HSRC was Geoffrey Cronjé, a prominent University of Pretoria academic and a leading spirit in Afrikaner cultural circles. He had lobbied for several years in the 1960s for the establishment of a science council for the humanities which would equal the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. He was unhappy that the universities were not paying sufficient attention to what he called the 'human sciences'. Needed, he explained, was the development of a 'social science' which would be 'in the national interest'.¹ What he meant by 'national' was, it needs to be emphasised, informed by his fierce defence of 'white' interest. He had been instrumental in writing an important manifesto for apartheid, 'Voogdyskap en apartheid'.² This work was an attempt to situate white supremacy in South Africa as a critical site in the world for the elaboration and development of modernity. In the project of apartheid, he believed, was to be found the apotheosis of what the European Enlightenment and its civilising intent, in substance, aimed at. In coming to its



50th anniversary, the HSRC was keen to demonstrate how much it had moved on from the thinking which animated Cronjé and his colleagues, and, importantly, to take position as a leader in South Africa and in the world in rethinking the responsibilities and tasks of imagining the humanities and the social sciences in their aspiration of the creation of an inclusive modernity. Towards this responsibility, with the support of the Consortium, it decided to masthead the Science Forum with the theme of 'Radical Reason'.

Radical Reason

The theme of Radical Reason was conceptualised as a deliberate attempt to engage with the history of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa and to invite discussion and debate about the future of the planet. It affirmed a commitment to the ideal of *reason* but looked, deliberately, to radically enlarge its logics. It engaged – and still seeks – to work critically with a double concern of primacy in subaltern thought. First, to drive the project of undoing structures of knowledge and ways of understanding the world and all of life within it that privilege representations of a European imaginary. And second, to critically shape the positionality of Southern worlds, in our case Africa in particular, in a new planetary-scape that is intellectually and morally hospitable. To put this differently, radical reason anticipates the supplementation of the global archive with its absent and diminished African narrative, so as to enable it to imagine for itself a new and inclusive future.

In so doing, the aim of the radical reason initiative in this special issue and at the Science Forum was to consider – and show – how African thought had and could contribute to the development of new logics and new forms of reason. To that reason which proceeded from the assumption that the world was naturally ordered around white supremacy, the project of *radical reason* sought to excavate and put to work logics of unconditional human equality – logics which did not seek to divide and order human beings hierarchically, but which would, instead, recognise and affirm the diverse contributions of people everywhere. Prompted by the global events of 2020 which saw life, science and race raised to new profiles with the spread of the novel coronavirus and the protests around Black Lives Matter, this special issue, building off the contributions of the HSRC Radical Reason Consortium, seeks to stimulate and engage critical knowledges that reflect the full complexity of the lived experiences and conditions of the world. In such times – on the horizon of the emergence of a not yet fully determinable world – radical thought, science, ethics, institutional arrangements, and other shared systems of valuation and understanding, are required to give depth and meaning to the full articulation of the questions that need to be asked *now* to engender the arrival of a just and equal world *to come*. No one discipline or system of thought can answer, or fully account for, the questions the world is facing today.

In this provocation, a point of departure is that the methodologies and truths of dominant forms of knowledge require constant interrogation, supplementation and renewal. It is recognised, too, that excluded forms of knowledge do not by themselves, and, in and of themselves, resolve the difficulties of dominance or the problems which dominance has precipitated; they hold in themselves, simply by virtue of their human-constructedness, contradiction. Critical, in this juncture, however, is the need to confront the ways in which dominance can function to exclude certain groups and people, how science can rationalise unethical practices in the name of objectivity, and, against this, to recover subordinated epistemes and to explore their fundamentals and their elaborations to see how they may elucidate alternative lines of thinking about the predicaments in which the world finds itself. Yet these alternative lines of thinking cannot escape critical scrutiny, too, and must themselves be subject to processes of reflective regeneration.

And so, as the events of the last few years have confirmed, no one discipline or a single episteme can answer the questions, or fully account for the conditions, facing us today. This crucial moment the world is in together, demands – as is argued here – radical reason. What is meant by this is dynamic and is unfolding in conversations such as those that took place at the 2020 Science Forum. To speak of 'reason' alerts all to the various forms of thought and scientific thinking at their disposal with

which to understand the world. To speak of 'radicality' at this juncture is to ask of the world's faculties of 'reason' to rethink themselves, to turn inwards in reflection and take stock of where they are at, and their value and capacity for truly understanding this moment in which the world finds itself.

In particular, we seek with this idea of Radical Reason, to affirm the place of African thought and knowledge, not just in helping us understand what we are facing here in South Africa, but also in responding to and helping to articulate the questions facing all of humanity, the world over. Such thought can help us to create new forms of reason and ways of understanding ourselves and each other, that do not divide or order human beings in any sort of hierarchy, but instead, recognise and affirm the diverse contributions of people everywhere.

This special issue

This special issue brings together a selection of critical contributions from thinkers from around the world, who all offer provocations for thinking anew what it means to be human now and here. These contributions either capture or extend presentations and conversations that took place at the 2020 Science Forum. Included here are four structured conversations, a response to one of these conversations, an original article, and two book reviews of books that were launched at the 2020 Science Forum.

Indeed, a major offering in this special issue is a series of conversations with leading thinkers from around the world. In these conversations, structured differently as interviews, conversations and dialogues, a series of intense engagements was undertaken with some of the foremost intellectuals in the world to reflect on the future of knowledge, critique and thought. It was particularly important for the Radical Reason Consortium to think with these leading figures from here in South Africa, and to stage conversations about the state of the world that were rooted in the Global South. Crain Soudien led a conversation with Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, two world-leading thinkers on epistemic justice and knowledge from the South; Premesh Lalu was in dialogue with Homi Bhabha, broadly recognised as the most important cultural theorist in the world today; and Rachel Adams interviewed Shaj Mohan, a prominent and radical philosopher of the sub-continent. Further summaries of these conversations are presented below, together with an outline of the contributions you will find in this special issue.

Mamphela Ramphele's plenary address – the first plenary address of the 2020 Science Forum – has been transcribed and extended into a structured conversation with Daya Reddy, who moderated the occasion, and Coleen Vogel, the respondent, in a piece entitled 'The future of transdisciplinarity: How do we relearn to be human in new ways?'. Ramphele writes of the future of transdisciplinarity and how the world relearns ways of being human together as it emerges from crises, including that of COVID-19, and the role of the community of scientists and thinkers therein. In this emergence, African thought – traditional and new – offers rich ways for recognising the cosmological breadth of where we find ourselves. In this intractable connection between humanity and life forms of all kinds, transdisciplinarity is the critical tool of knowledge to fully grasp our planetary potentiality.

In a commentary written as a response to the piece by Ramphele, Vogel and Reddy, Martin Visbeck – an oceanographer – offers some personal reflections on the international and interdisciplinary cooperation required in the study of the ocean and climate variability and change, heralding the inability of any one discipline, university or country to make significant progress on this global topic. Critically, too, Visbeck speaks of the 'academic contract between universities and societies' and the need for centres of knowledge to respond with urgency to the crises we face.

In her original article, Lesley Green deepens our understanding of transdisciplinary by exploring the relationality of the natural and social sciences, and the emerging scholarship therein, in pursuit of a new research paradigm she calls 'anthropocenography', which is built upon a recognition of the material flows which shape our present anthropocentric condition. The piece, entitled 'Paradigm shifts for a planetary emergency: Towards an anthropocenography for urban coastal research at False

Bay, Cape Town, South Africa', pursues a set of inquiries around transdisciplinarity in response to emerging scholarship in the South Africa socio-ecological sciences. These include a critique of the utility of the conceptual categories of 'nature' and 'science', and a plea for the vitality of humanities scholarship in historicising and problematising the scholarship and empiricism of the natural sciences.

Green's article is part of her broader oeuvre that engages multiple ways of seeing and understanding the interconnectedness of our social and environmental condition; a scholarship deeply rooted in observation of the natural world of the Cape coastline out of which it arises. Her book, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and humanities for a decolonial South Africa* published in 2020 by Wits and Duke University Press, offers a rich exploration of the relationship between environmentalism and racial justice in South Africa. In a review of this book included in this special issue, the theologian Graham Ward teases out the grounding power of context – as a disruptor of the normative dimensions of static forms of knowledge, and as a radical form of empiricism – that underlies the originality of Green's work.

The notion and task of the university takes centre stage in the structured conversation between Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, managed by Crain Soudien. The context for the discussion was the deepening hold of managerialism on the modern university and the limiting forms of accountability generated by it. In the conversation Santos recovers the critical role of the university in extending the bounds of the imaginary while Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes in detail the mechanisms that have led to the particular kind of 'enclosures' that are evident in the modern university. An important element in the conversation, prompted by Soudien's question on where hope for the university is to be found, is the recovery of examples around the world where institutions and disciplines have been able to innovate their way through the strictures of neo-liberal accountability.

The discussion between Homi Bhabha and Premesh Lalu, moderated by Jean Baxen, takes forward the earlier engagement in important ways. Framing the conversation was the question posed by Baxen of how an intellectual project in this time of uncertainty could rise to the demand of facilitating the development of a more just and fairer world. Strikingly, picking up an observation by Bhabha about the impact South Africa had on him, Lalu draws attention to the country's critical intellectual traditions. The discussion pivots on the generative possibilities inherent in the critique of apartheid for explaining what Lalu describes as the broader global condition. Of specific concern in the discussion is the infiltration of apartheid's discursive modalities into everyday life and the difficulty, as Bhabha implies, of moving away from this condition.

The final structured conversation takes place between Shaj Mohan and Rachel Adams. Mohan is a philosopher of the Indian sub-continent,

whose thought is increasingly becoming one of the most radical and important contributions to the philosophy of the world, today.³ In this conversation, Adams invites Mohan to return to the question of what philosophy is, and what the task of the philosopher is at crises points, like that in which we find ourselves. Mohan's response subverts the question to declare – as the piece is entitled – 'I take, and I am taken, by what belongs to philosophy', and urges philosophy to uncover, make light of, and arrive us out of the ruins of our world. In this reckoning, Mohan insists on philosophy's faculty to redeem democracy, that is, a true democracy of the world.

In South Africa, public intellectuals like Mohan, have played a critical role in the country's history. A new book that brings together an extraordinary collection of vignettes capturing the contributions of a series of anti-apartheid public intellectuals or dissidents, entitled *The Fabric of Dissent: Public Intellectuals in South Africa* and edited by Vasu Reddy, Narnia Bohler-Muller, Gregory Houston, Maxi Schoeman and Heather Thuynsma, was published by HSRC Press in 2020, and reviewed in this special issue by Keyan Tomaselli. Tomaselli describes the genealogical approach of the book in offering a historical inquiry attuned to the workings of power, and bringing renewed visibility to the contributions to public critical thought made by a series of 77 figures.

The efforts that went into putting together the programme of events at the 2020 Science Forum, and subsequently in contributing to and assembling this special issue, were extraordinary. As Guest Editors of this special issue, we are especially grateful to our Consortium partners and colleagues at the DSI who gave so much in order to be able to offer the world-leading collection that is presented here. We also thank Mark Gaffley for his work in transcribing the interviews included in this special issue. Lastly, our special thanks goes to the SAJS – to the Editor-in-Chief, the editorial team and to the Board – for supporting a different kind of special issue that itself moved beyond the boundaries of the traditional forms and structure of published scholarship, offering not just new ways of thinking about the problems we face, but new ways of presenting and sharing such thinking.

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