

Book Reviews

Beyond a Culture of Censorship

A Culture of Censorship. Secrecy and Intellectual Repression in South Africa.

by Christopher Merrett

Cape Town: David Philip, University of Natal,

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This is a quite extraordinary book—one that combines meticulous scholarship and research with a keen eye for the drama of resistance and oppression in the field of censorship in South Africa. A further advantage is that Merrett has not focused narrowly on the popular notion of censorship as the activity that bans *Scope* magazine or *A History of Red Bait*, but has persuasively shown how censorship can conceal itself in a variety of ways, including unexpected practices like labour or industrial legislation.

Merrett recalls Milan Kundera's remark: 'The struggle is also a struggle against forgetting'. This makes the publication of the study timely in the light of the debate that is currently being waged on the nature of the *Truth Commission* and the *Freedom of Information Act*. From this perspective alone, the book is part of the history of the present. There is enough evidence in the nine chapters of the pernicious and incremental influence of any attempt to introduce secrecy or restricting practices on any aspect of communication, personal or mass.

Merrett reminds us that one of the most important and perhaps least appreciated characteristics of the South African censorship system has been its longevity. Its roots lie in the *Suppression of Communism Act* of 1950 and the first chapter describes the formative years until 1958 as the state found increasing *political* reasons for it to act *morally*. The state became increasingly aware of the situation neatly described by Nadine Gordimer,

No social system in which a tiny minority must govern without consent over a vast majority can afford to submit any part of control of communication to the hazard of a court decision.

This so-called tactical reason for the introduction of censorship was matched by a need to minimise contact between race groups and a further desire to perpetuate the myth that differences between them were greater than common humanity. As a commentator wrote in the mid-1970s,

Certainly, the South African government cares enough about ideas to try very hard to prevent some from reaching South Africa.

One remarkable aspect of this book, apart from its detailed recounting of watershed historical and political events, is the author's appreciation of an

insightful phrase. He recalls Kundera's description of 'organized forgetting' in Czechoslovakia, Amanda Armstrong's summing up of intellectual repression as 'manufactured normality', Marcuse's aphorism about 'repressive tolerance' in which a certain amount of dissenting discourse is permitted to encourage the idea of a reasonably liberal society and Roy Campbell's description of the censorship provisions as 'the fiercely ironic abuse of an illiterate ruling class'.

These quotations show that even if the bad guys had all the power, the good guys had all the best lines!

Merret's analysis of laws such as the *Native Administration Act* of 1927 shows how censorship, forbidding criticism of forced removals for instance, lurk behind any repressive administrative legislation. Later on he reminds us of the *Salem* case in 1979 in which all the details about illegal oil transactions were concealed under the *Official Secrecy Act*. And again he shows how the *Companies Act* forbids details to be published about the performance of South African companies in foreign markets.

Censorship has had many faces including bannings of individuals, house arrest and restriction of movement. The account of the harassment of journalists and the draconian measures taken against mainstream newspapers and the alternative press either makes for depressing reading or causes a surge of anger at this rape of the human right to information. The difficulties in reporting events like the Steve Biko case should not be forgotten.

The 'Total Onslaught' obsession had its share in consolidating various aspects of censorship.

However, it is the last chapters, 'The Impact of Censorship' and 'Censorship in a Democratic South Africa' that make for sober reading. It is not coincidental that the title of the book is '*The Culture of Censorship*'. Merrett argues that the years of censorship in all its forms have created a climate that is conducive to limitation rather than liberation of thought. He reminds us that press freedom is not about freedom for journalists but about individual liberty and the right of people to be adequately informed.

He suggests that extra-legal, informal repression has become the most important facet of South African censorship, and in terms of its effect on the social fabric, perhaps the most devastating. He believes the government should shed its securocrat tendency by limiting the power of bureaucrats. He also repeats Philip van Niekerk's question: 'Will the deficiencies of the press prove the weak link in a democratic South Africa?'

The ten points he raises about the pernicious, lingering effects of censorship need to be discussed widely in academic, government and media circles. Bram Fisher's statement in 1964 is still valid:

If by my fight I can encourage people to think about, to understand and abandon the policies they so blindly follow, I shall not regret any punishment I may incur ... if the court does have to punish any of my fellow accused, it will be punishing them for holding the ideas today that will be universally accepted tomorrow.