

POLITICAL CENSORSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA: AIMS AND CONSEQUENCES

by Christopher E Merrett

"Censorship ends in logical completeness when nobody is allowed to read any books except the books nobody can read." ¹

In AD 35, Caligula, fearful of the effect of Greek ideas on Rome, banned Homer's *Odyssey*. In the following nineteen centuries Caligula's spiritual heirs have banned Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Locke, Voltaire, Jefferson, Mill, Zola and Steinbeck among many authors. Indeed the work of almost every writer of worth has been banned at some time, in some place. Such censorship is a classic tool of totalitarian governments; the crime being opposition to the regime. Where the Soviets create the 'unperson' so in South Africa we have the 'banned Communist', the terms Communist and Marxist being used promiscuously by the Government as convenient and damning labels. Totalitarian ideology raises the State, the constitution and its agents to divine heights and sees individual morality and cultural freedom as subversive. Indeed moral questioning is denied to the individual as it has become the preserve of the State. Individual fulfillment through identification with the regime is justified by the semantic contrivance that since the State is the sum of individuals, so its authority is a manifestation of liberty. Of course, this is at odds with the West European tradition, in which a code of rules safeguards a minimum sphere of liberty for each person, protected from the licence of others. Totalitarian regimes long ago realized the advantages of possessing all the 'loudspeakers', by controlling education, the media, and public utterances in general.

Haight writes: "In the history of censorship, the oldest and most frequently recurring controls have been those designed to prevent unorthodox and unpopular expressions of political or religious opinions". ² The aim of this article is to discuss the current nature of such control in South Africa with particular emphasis on book production. This leaves aside the well known self censorship of the press, enmeshed in a labyrinthine web of laws which require editors to be lawyers rather than journalists, and ensure that the State is the only commentator on certain issues. The State has good reason to fear book and journal production. It controls and monopolizes the educational process, television and radio, while the Press, through fear of the law and the balance sheet is wrapped in its own cocoon of self restraint. Poetry and prose are powerful weapons — above all they have lasting qualities and their circulation can be vast. This is particularly galling to an authoritarian regime which sees literature in strictly utilitarian rather than aesthetic terms, a means to the end of shaping society in its image. However, free thought cannot be entirely eliminated. While people continue to think there will be others willing to record those thoughts, even if these remain unread for a long time. No State can control **entirely** either thought or writing, an exercise which could be contrasted in its futility with an attempt to swat all the flies in South Africa. Writers form an "island of separateness" ³, a powerful threat

to the establishment and total social control. In spite of persecution it must be a source of encouragement to writers to know that they are part of an indestructible force even though, for some, their writings will be relevant only to posterity.

Censorship in South Africa was codified in 1963 by the Publications and Entertainments Act which defined the term 'undesirable' in forty different ways but allowed a right of appeal to the Appellate Division, theoretically providing a check on the Publications Control Board by the application of judicial norms. Certainly open court hearings, such as that involving Andre Brink's *Kennis van die aand*, brought the censorship process into public debate. In 1974 the Publications Act abolished this right of appeal and set up its own appeal board. The Directorate of Publications continues to ban on the strength of an isolated part of a work and sees as its task " . . . to uphold a Christian view of life".⁴ The ban on the importation, continued printing, publication, display, retail and circulation of banned items was retained but a new category of 'possession prohibited' was instituted. Initially, transcripts of pleas and evidence which are part of strictly legal publications; technical, scientific and professional publications for the advance of the arts, science and literature; and religious publications, were exempted, but the last two categories were excised by the Publications Amendment Act of 1977. The Directorate of Publications also has the power of seizure and the right to enter premises on the suspicion that an undesirable publication is being printed or published, and the ability to ban all issues of any one title or the output of a specific publisher. The infamous section 47(2) contains the criteria for banning which are: a) obscenity and harm to public morals; b) blasphemy and offence to religious convictions; c) bringing of a section of the community into contempt or ridicule; d) harming relations between sections of the community; e) prejudicing the safety of the State, general welfare, peace and good order; f) disclosing certain judicial proceedings.

This, however, is not all. Censorship is also enshrined in the internal security legislation which has been built upon the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. This restrains the quoting of banned persons as well as the publications of those banned persons and listed organizations. Up to 31 December 1978, 1358 original banning orders had been served with enormous repercussions on the availability of literature. In addition, the African National Congress (ANC), South African Congress of Democrats, Pan African Congress (PAC), Defence and Aid, South African Communist Party and the African Resistance Movement are proscribed. Among many authors thus affected are Alex Hepple, Fatima Meer, Ronald Segal, Eddie Roux, Donald Woods, Helen Joseph, Brian Bunting, Alex La Guma, Denis Brutus and Ruth First.

It has been fashionable at times to discover humour in some of the more bizarre censorship decisions, most of which date from the early days of Customs embargoes — for example, the restrictions on **Black Beauty** and Hardy's **Return of the native**. Such levity can, however, easily mask the sinister and coldly logical nature of the censorship system. Censorship is not an aberration — it has become an integral part of South African society, one of the many unedifying faces on the obverse of the coin of rugby, braai, sunny skies and Chevrolet. Such suppression of freedom is accepted by a majority of White South Africans with the sheep-like conviction that 'the government must have its reasons' and 'there's no smoke without fire'. In other words, censorship is part of the grand design of apartheid and the 'total onslaught' myth which will not tolerate any questioning of the status quo. If Steiner is correct in saying that the written word is the "primary homeland"⁵ of the dispossessed, a most tenacious means of communication and an effective opponent of officially sanctioned mass values, the government has a formidable adversary. As Gordimer sums up: "No society in which a tiny minority must govern without consent over a vast majority can afford to submit any part of control of communication . . ." ⁶ It is an apt comment on apartheid that cerebral isolation is apparently essential for its survival, and this is put into context by Royston: "Apartheid is not a catastrophe . . . it is a system of routine deprivation and disruption"⁷; and Gordimer, who describes censorship as an octopus of thought surveillance. Censorship is part of a system which seeks to bury certain ideas and even to ensure that people are forgotten, as in the case of banned persons.⁸

Perversely the government appears to think that Blacks are unaware of their own repression and that if censorship controls dissemination of grievances the latter will somehow vaporize. Paternalism is too innocuous a word to describe this process in which the government is using literature as an ideological weapon to reconcile people to the roles in South African society determined for them on the basis of racial classification. This central myth of the system is supported by censorship such that the latter will not disappear until the mythology is dismantled. Any apparent amelioration of the law simply conceals a shift in purpose. Writers who see themselves as creative individuals, pointing out options for society's future and bringing to society's attention the matters it might prefer to ignore, are bound to clash head on with the totalitarian state. The latter is frightened by the truth and displays the sort of amorality which censors love across racial barriers but permits the gratuitous violence which encourages a war psychosis. Apartheid is based on repression and censorship is a vital cog in that system, using information and thought control to stifle healthy doubt, questioning and cynicism.

It has already been suggested that complete censorship is an impossible objective to fulfil. It is also possible to argue that the South African system is so inefficient that it defeats its own ends, although the writer who read a story from a manuscript in Iowa to find it banned 'publisher unknown' in the Government Gazette, might not agree. Certainly there is a looseness in the system which thwarts total control. For example, when a banned person dies, he or she is unbanned and books become freely available until individually banned by the Directorate of Publications. There is no definitive official publication containing the names of all banned or listed persons. In any case it would be impossible to remove from library shelves every book or journal with references to or by, edited by, or contributed to, by such persons. Furthermore, some titles are banned in hard or soft-

back only. The organizational obstacles are massive and policing so difficult that in practice every library has a selection of the thoughts of banned persons on its open shelves. On the other hand the complexity of the Law is such that those who enforce it clearly do not understand all the implications. This is particularly true of bannings under internal security legislation where queries directed to the Department of Justice have simply been ignored. Whether complexity of regulations and a deafening silence in response to questions aid or frustrate liberty is debatable. The resultant uncertainty and even fear would seem to suggest the latter and low usage of banned book collections means that the system works.

The process of banning books can also be seen as self-defeating in the sense that it draws attention to titles and endows them with a mysterious power which they might not otherwise deserve. Certainly some of the more turgid Marxist writings might become more alluring because they are known to be out of favour with the regime. Brink draws attention to the fact that censorship can provide stimulation for the writer in a closed society, and make obvious to him what he ought to do. "When the conspiracy of lies surrounding me demands of me to silence the one word of truth given to me, that word becomes the one word I wish to utter above all others; and at the same time it is the word my metaphysical situation, my historical situation and my own craft demand of me to utter."⁹

Writers carry the optimism of the conviction that truth will triumph and that literature can celebrate the true humanity of man as opposed to enforced patterns of behaviour, by identifying with the oppressed and exposing the lie. Indeed Pierre van den Berghe maintains^{9a} that the optimum milieu for a creative intelligensia is an unjust and indefensible society with a moderately and inefficiently repressive regime and an urban population living at above starvation level. Clearly South Africa fits this model, as did Fanon's Algeria, Voltaire's Bourbon France and Tolstoy's Czarist Russia. In addition, he claims, such a political dispensation is tailor made for revolution. It is interesting to note that South African literary prizes are invariably awarded to left wing writers: Achmed Dangor (Mofolo-Plomer prize), Breytenbach and La Guma (Hertzog prize), Le Roux, Brink and Gordimer (CNA prize). As the last writer points out, establishment, right wing South Africa is bankrupt in a literary sense.

Conversely the censorship system has caused many writers to flee South Africa. Such exiles can no longer draw on their experiences or the language and thought of South Africa. The continued control of those who stay has had the effect of driving Black writers underground and reinforcing that wall built between Black experience and grievance and those Whites who wish to know about them. The banning, for example, of **Confused Mhlaba** by Khayaletu Mqayisa, on the grounds that the play harmed race relations and compromised the safety of the State,¹⁰ showed, according to the defence, that real events were being withheld from White South Africans and that the banning itself hurt race relations as it reduced the potential for mutual understanding. Not only is all South Africa denied access to thinking of radical Black Africa and formative political and social thinking in the Free World, but Whites are to remain ignorant of the feelings of fellow citizens. Literature written by Blacks, dealing in depth with the Black condition, is immediately a target for suppression. Grant comments that to avoid contravening the law you have to be ". . . either illiterate, philistine or an avid reader of the Government Gazette."¹¹

Nevertheless some courageous publishers continue to print the riskier literature, for example Ad Donker, Ravan, Bateleur and David Philip. In recent years there has been a tendency to turn to poetry. It is less explicit, often cryptic and perhaps less easily understood by the censors, who might in any case expect it to be less popular. It is also quicker to write in an urgent situation and is becoming increasingly political in content, as the banning of James Matthews' *Cry Rage* has shown. Loss of freedom for writers has encouraged loyalty to the struggle against repression, although the resultant jargon is not always the best vehicle for literary expression.

Brink draws attention to the growth of a clandestine literature on Soviet lines: *tamisdat* (published abroad); and *samisdat* (underground circulation). As in Moscow, literature is an instrument for political change with the surreptitious sale of books on Soweto streets, fly-by-night drama performances, poetry readings and pamphlet distribution. Two thousand copies of *A dry white season* were distributed under the imprint Taurus before Brink's book was banned in an early example of *samisdat* literature. Writers have become agents for political change to the extent that the security police are interested in the chairman of the writers' association, PEN.

It has become common to hear of the liberalization of the censorship system. Such a facile judgement seems to be based on confusion between the interdependence of censorship and apartheid, and a more liberal attitude on the part of the authorities towards nudes and swear words. The release from banning of Gordimer's *Burger's daughter*, Brink's *A dry white season* and Le Roux's *Magersfontein* can be seen as a cynical attempt to buy off White authors and drive a wedge between White and Black writers. That this is merely a change of emphasis is shown by the simultaneous banning of Matshoba's *Call me not a man*. Censorship has become more sophisticated but no less dangerous and the concept of the 'enlightened censor' has no validity. The 'probable reader' has replaced that curious species the 'average South African' as a criterion for assessment and 'quality of literature' has been invoked. In fact this is a smokescreen for crude censorship based on colour – the main consideration is what the Black masses might read as intellectuals articulate those grievances which could otherwise remain unexpressed. Black writing is feared and therefore controlled because it is inspirational. Satire, for example, is now given a freer rein but it is more appropriate to Whites, Blacks being too close to the struggle. Consideration of literary merit is thus a political contrivance, and in any case denies the right for poor quality literature to be read and judged as such. From time to time apologists of censorship try to conjure up a more liberal mood. Leighton, for example, exhorts writers to use fantasy: "If you are not allowed to criticize the government or its agencies, then describe the antics of pigs, as Orwell does in *Animal Farm*." 12

Brink suggests that exceptions have been made of a few well known and coincidentally internationally recognized White writers. This has had the side effect of disseminating radical literature. For example, *Burger's daughter* contains a banned pamphlet of Soweto Students' Council and *Rumours of Rain* reproduces much of the court testimony of Bram Fischer. In a sense writers are donning the mantle of journalist but this is allowed as an exception, fitting neatly into a society run on the basis of permits. There is no liberalization in a system which grants those permits to Whites but denies them to Blacks. Nadine Gordimer refused to appeal against the ban on *Burger's daughter* as this would legitimize the system and South Africa was treated to the bizarre spectacle

of the Directorate of Publications appealing against its own ban to itself. If the severity of the system is an indication of the effectiveness of those it is designed to contain, then it is possible that the authorities feel they have neutralized the radical Whites. Gordimer also claims that White description of Black suffering by proxy is paradoxically acceptable in a way in which similar Black writing is not, thus involving White writers, often unwilling, in a privileged position. The fact that contentious topics may now be discussed if written in a sophisticated idiom in no way obscures the fact that a different psychology is being used towards the same repressed end. Nor has there been a downturn in absolute numbers of bannings. In fact Silver has shown, through a study of the Government Gazette of the period 1974 – 8, a steady increase in the total number, in the proportion of 'possession prohibited' items and the relative number of political bannings. Student publications in particular have been hard hit.

Censorship contains an explicit attack on academic freedom. Welsh asks if it is possible to be a scholar of integrity in South Africa and yet remain within the law. Studies of Marxism and Black nationalism and literature have in particular been obstructed. Academics have to travel abroad to keep up to date and publication is accompanied by extreme nervousness. In the case of banned or listed persons, all their output is proscribed regardless of political or other content. For example, Ruth First's work cannot ordinarily be consulted in South Africa but this includes straightforward history in the form of a biography of Olive Schreiner. For those academics of strong political convictions there is the problem that applications for the use of material legitimize the system. Garson claims that "The greatest danger is the temptation simply to cease asking the questions that can only be answered by using the censored material." 13

It is of course a well known fact that authoritarian regimes enlist the general public as willing or unwilling, witting or unwitting, agents of the control process. Such an ambitious rein on free thought and its dissemination would hardly otherwise be possible. Prominent among the agents of the censorship system is the librarian, who administers the process by which access, for bona fide study purposes, is possible to banned material. An academic library's open exemption permits the use of banned books within the library or makes them available for loan on the authority of a supervisor, subject to a certain amount of form filling, and restrictions on access and photocopying. Similarly the exemption helps academics who wish to acquire such books for academic research purposes. In the case of 'possession prohibited' and internal security bannings, a library has to seek permission to hold each title. Such titles may only be used for study purposes after individual application to the Directorate of Publications or Department of Justice as appropriate, a Catch 22 situation which requires the motivation to use a book which by definition has yet to be seen by the user. The response of librarians to this system has been varied. Some have aided and abetted censorship by acting in a timid fashion, placing restrictions on or simply failing to order books which might be banned. Three libraries in the South African Library Association survey of 1978 did not include banned books in the main catalogue and a number use unnecessarily complex issue systems. Such circumspect actions effectively build a second censorship system on top of the government's. The library profession as a whole likes to pride itself on its unified opposition to censorship. This apparent liberal standpoint begins to ring hollow when it is closely examined, for it comprises a call to the Government to amalgamate censorship legislation under one Act, so that all banned material may be listed in

the Government Gazette and Jacobsen's Index. In other words it is a desire for administrative tidiness which would make the task of the librarian easier and perhaps lessen possible tension between librarian and library user; but it contains no real attack on an undemocratic and unacademic system, and thus compromises with repression. Few librarians have thought beyond the issue of academic inconvenience, to the real issues facing society. The recent introduction into South African librarianship training of 'library philosophy and ethics' might attract some respect if it were to concern itself with the implications of the totalitarian state for the library. In addition to librarians, booksellers have now been inveigled into the system. The Department of Customs and Excise embargo on books is to end and booksellers will receive material direct. The fact that the booksellers will be liable to retrospective prosecution for stocking banned books, and even the cancellation of licences as a punishment, suggests that a self censorship system will be erected on top of that recorded in the Government Gazette. Booksellers will understandably be concerned with financial survival rather than political freedom. The Government has subtly shifted the onus for the policing of its censorship system to a non official agency. This is all the more significant when bearing in mind the increasing difficulties in staffing and effectively administering the massive bureaucracy which runs apartheid South Africa.

The question of self induced censorship has implications for publishing as a whole. The insistent hammering of the propaganda machine in general and the complexity of the censorship system in particular, have encouraged the assumption in the public mind that rights are even more restricted than the law actually allows. Thus is developed the caution in librarians and booksellers noted above, and so are destroyed basic beliefs in civil rights taken for granted in the Free World. For example, in 1971 Oxford University Press published the second volume of the **Oxford history of South Africa** and excluded from the 'South African edition' Leo Kuper's contribution 'African nationalism in South Africa, 1910 – 1964'. Kuper had spent two years preparing this work and points out that self censorship in his case would not only have been academically dishonest, but actually impossible given the topic. A scholarly account of the ANC is impossible without quoting the aims of the organization. OUP and the editors took the decision to omit the chapter from the 'South African edition' and substitute blank pages. In this case, as Kuper maintains, the publishers rather than the South African government were the censors, an act of self abnegation made to seem all the more ludicrous since the 'International edition' has never been banned, and can be bought, in South Africa. OUP explained that they felt that South African law could be infringed by publishing Kuper's work which illustrates well the three stage development of censorship : official action; writers' self censorship; and an inhibiting control by non government bodies. Barend van Niekerk describes the last as "... abdication in anticipating ...", with a "... tendency to extend the scope of impermissibility to a point well beyond the demands of the law." 15. The weight of repressive law in the last twenty five years has been such that "... (it) may at times appear to be impregnated by religious or mystical norms." 16

The 1974 Publications Act emphatically removed the censorship system from the rule of law, primarily by denying the right of appeal. Although the broad outlines of the system are enshrined in law, its administration and policing are carried out by a bureaucracy answerable only to itself,

dedicated to the imposition of mass values and denial of the right to question. As with other areas of apartheid legislation it is pertinent to query the degree of congruence between the intent of the law and its implementation by bureaucrats. Bureaucratic interpretation may vary with the time and demands of a particular situation, but at all times we are being told what is good for us in the name of a spurious vox populi. Such an edifice is tailor made for the dominance of sectional interests. The chairman of the government appointed Directorate of Publications can dictate literary norms so as to "... impose the greatest restraint on expression and the search for truth ... (ushering) in an era of intellectual torpor." 17

Censorship is one of the oldest tricks of the totalitarian trade, designed to counter the immense power of the written word and turn it to the advantage of the regime. Control of literature is an integral and cynical part of the apartheid system, even though some of the results may be counterproductive. The suggestion that censorship is being liberalized is a misreading of an attempt by the South African government to placate Whites and international opinion or, even more sinister, to split the literary World on racial lines. Of course it is a direct challenge to civil rights in general and academic freedom in particular. The practical problems inherent in the policing of such a vast system have led to the implicit recruitment of librarians, booksellers and publishers as its agents. Its success has largely stemmed from its bewildering complexity. South Africans do not expect to have rights and where these are obscured they are generally assumed not to exist. Caution is the watchword, such that self censorship by writers and publishers has created a climate as effective as the official banning system itself; or, censorship within the censorship system. Above all of course is the erosion of the rule of law, substituted by a bureaucracy answerable to nothing but a prevailing and sectional ideology. The Government and its Directorate of Publications can be likened to the proverbial blind man and his deaf friend. Significantly they would like us to be blind and deaf as well, but it is unlikely that they rather than radical writers will be vindicated by posterity. History has already shown the staying power of the written word. □

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