

Capital and Ideology in South Africa 1890—1933

The Political Nature of the Ruling Class:

Author: Belinda Bozzoli

Published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981
Price: Approx R29.85 384pp

Represented in South Africa
by MacMillan

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Belinda Bozzoli's book is not primarily about media. It sets out "to explore the bourgeoisie ... in all its various manifestations in that complex society which is South Africa" (p. 3). This extensive and lucid study spans the years 1890-1933, years which, as she points out, are particularly rich in insights into the nature of the ruling class as a whole, its experience of class formation, and relation between class and the emergence of the state.

Bozzoli identifies three sectors of the bourgeoisie, representing mining, commercial and manufacturing. The distinction between 'imperial' and 'national' capital cuts across these sectors. Initially hegemonic, 'imperial' capital comprised mining, merchant, British-based manufacturing and agricultural capital. In the final phases of the period under consideration, it is 'national' capital, the 'new bourgeoisie' which is ascendant, and which is by then made up of industrialists, traders, certain mining companies and farmers (p. 171). The differences, and interrelations, between these various divisions within the ruling class are as important for an understanding of the bourgeoisie as a whole as an holistic view is for the understanding of particular sectors.

The book sets out to uncover the twin processes of 'class formation', whereby a group of people evolve economic, ideological and political relationships, both within their own group and outside it; and 'interest-translation', the way in which this class (in this case capitalists) bridged the gap between their abstract economic needs, and the social implications arising therefrom. In unravelling these processes, Bozzoli explores, with a thoroughness not encountered in other historical studies of the South African media, the journals, speeches, reports, minutes and petitions in which the bourgeoisie, or more often, those employed to articulate capitalist interests, "expressed their views about their place in the evolving social system at crucial stages in South African history..." (p. 9).

Journals such as the South African Mining Journal, the South African Commercial Bulletin and the South African Commerce and Manufacturers Record, worked in turn to create, articulate and maintain the ideologies and self awareness of the particular sectors of capital they served. For students of the media, this is where the primary focus of the book's interest lies.

This review of the book will therefore concentrate on Bozzoli's use of the media to uncover the historical processes she analyses. These sources enable her to provide a rich and fascinating account of the development of South Africa's ruling class, and particularly, of its self awareness and ideological presence.

Central to an understanding of both class formation and interest-translation,

is the Gramscian concept of the 'organic intellectual'. Gramsci notes that every "new class" creates intellectuals "alongside itself", and elaborates them in the course of its own development (1). These intellectuals are 'organic' in the sense that they identify completely with the class, or sub-class, whose interests they express. All sections of the bourgeoisie in the period of Bozzoli's study employed men in the capacities of journalists, speech makers and writers to undertake the ideological labour of capital. Most of their efforts were directed back to the class which had spawned them, defining and clarifying the bourgeoisie's own position and standpoints to themselves - bridging the "gap between economic interests and political and ideological realities" (p. 10). Organic intellectuals had a dual function: to create ideologies and to provide strategies by which to implement the more abstract ideas. The former happened only at particular, crucial periods during which capital, (or a section thereof) was under stress, not only economically, but socially. At these critical junctures, the ruling class needed to "embed themselves firmly in the social formation itself" (p.11) - a task which required the formulation of a specific sense of identity on their part. In addition, the bourgeoisie needed a workable policy, and guidelines on how to put these into practice. These guidelines were provided in the pages of the specialist journals circulating among the bourgeoisie itself.

The different functions of these media at different periods reflected the status of the sector they served and their relative position vis-a-vis other sectors of capital. In the early period of mining hegemony, for instance, the mining media

reveal a profound concern with fundamental social and political issues, ranging from the destruction of pre-capitalist black family structures, to the overthrow of the Kruger regime; from the advocacy of the importation of tens of thousands of Chinese labourers, to the manipulation of white-working class employment patterns and expressions of resistance (p. 9)

In parallel with these concerns was the creation of a racist and imperial ideology which related to the broader needs of the bourgeoisie as a whole. By the 1920s, however, these same journals appeared "quite barren by contrast" (p. 9). Devoid of social content, they simply regurgitated previously formulated ideological themes.

Bozzoli's analysis of the media serving the commercial sectors is of particular interest, since this sector of capital is commonly neglected by the various 'factionalist' accounts of the South African political economy. The disadvantaged position of commerce in relation to other sectors of capital is clearly indicated by the lack of any specific media to serve it before the 1920s. Before this time, annual reports and other public documents are devoid of far-reaching sociological input, in contrast to the contemporary media of manufacturing and mining. The chief organ of the commercial bourgeoisie was the Commercial Bulletin, established in 1921, together with the speeches and annual reports of Assocom (p. 167).

Both the mining and the manufacturing media tended to be entirely inward looking. They circulated among 'their' sectors of the bourgeoisie only, and outlined a world view for their class audience. The commercial media, on the other hand, adopted a broader approach, and included the state and 'the public' under its aegis. The latter media were clearly used for the spreading as well as the creating of views and opinions. These were often of a highly innovative kind, especially during the interwar years. They advocated a strongly 'South Africanist' ideology, which was highly critical of any suggestion of protectionism. This outlook reflected the interest of all the sectors comprising 'national' capital, as outlined in the beginning of this review. The Bulletin saw this

as a self-conscious aim:

One of the primary functions of this journal is to reflect as accurately as possible commercial opinion on all subjects directly or indirectly connected not only with trade, but also with all that concerns the economic progress and development of the country generally ... (*Bulletin*, Feb. 1932, quoted on p. 168).

The external orientation of the commercial media made it the ideal vehicle in which to articulate the needs of national capital which was latterly gaining ascendancy. Its main function was to create a link between the bourgeoisie and the wider society. It acted alongside the ideological media of manufacturing - the senior partner in the thrust for 'South Africanism' - which, at this stage was more concerned with consolidating, than creating, ideologies. The "third sphere" of the South Africanists' ideological effort, which Bozzoli considers the "most remarkable", were the "intellectuals of capital emerging in the state apparatus" (p. 170). These men, not previously apparent in the creation and dissemination of earlier phases of capitalist ideology, assumed as part of their creative intellectual function, the orchestration of intellectual efforts of the various sections of the bourgeoisie and their allies, which were to be co-ordinated under the hegemony of national capital.

This 'coming together' of nationalist capitalist interest, and its identification with the interests of the whole of the white population, was already evident by the mid-1920s, and reached a peak in the 30s:

... all things pointed towards the need for co-opting, conciliating and accommodating whites of all classes into the industrial revolution, whether as voters, trade unionists, consumers, workers or investors (p. 205).

It was, predictably, the media of commerce which spearheaded the task of orientating the needs of 'the people' to those of capital. Commercial ideologists set out to "create the useful and all-embracing concept of 'public opinion', with its subsidiary concept of 'the (white) man in the street'" (p. 205). 'Public opinion' began to reflect the sentiments of the broad base of the white population, something which had not previously happened, but was still manipulated to reflect the needs and interests of capital.

The job of incorporating the whole cross-section of the white population into supporting a 'South Africanist' industrialization policy proved to be too large an undertaking for the commercial ideologists to handle alone. Bozzoli notes that:

It would seem not to be coincidental, ... that it was in this period of the rising need of the new bourgeoisie for a 'new' public opinion that great changes and expansion took place in the field of South African journalism and other media (p. 207).

As has previously been hinted, Bozzoli does not include an analysis of the mass media in her study, confining herself to the content of the professional media directly related to the bourgeoisie itself. However, the two pages in which she touches on the popular newspapers of the time, are filled with suggestive pointers to a more thorough-going appraisal of the ideological role of newspapers in times of hegemonic uncertainty (pp. 207-209).

Changes in the format and presentation of the mass media, then as now, reflected a change in the composition of the class-structure of their perceived audience. Nor do the similarities with the contemporary period end here: 'political' censorship was introduced into South African newspapers for the first time in

1926, when the Pact Government laid down that all political articles and leaders had to be signed. Bozzoli attributes this "plea for a more 'neutral' press" to the need to broaden the appeal of the older, elitist-style newspapers, in order to serve the needs of the growing, lower middle and working classes, which increasingly made up newspapers' readership. At the same time, the upsurge in consumerism, coming as it did in tandem with the increased female consuming and wage-earning population, led to a new format for the daily newspapers. 'Special interest' pages were introduced under the co-ordination of a 'features bureau', and included such topics as motoring, property, recreation, and most importantly, fashion, cookery and other domestic pursuits. The most striking parallel with the present situation, however, was the fact that it was the newspaper groups themselves that instigated a change of policy in order to maximize their circulations. In a list of recommendations made to its staff, the Argus group made numerous suggestions, all of which bolstered the myth of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'. They included "... the ideas that political news be presented without party bias, and that comments be strictly confined to editorial columns (p.208). Company reports should also be dissociated from the newspaper's own editorial. In this way newspapers pre-empted the state's attempts to force a change of format on them, in a similar strategy to that adopted by the printed news media today.

A realization of the class-base of these ideological tendencies should cause us to pause over the present Government's injunctions for a more 'balanced' and 'responsible' press. More importantly perhaps, we should look at the process of self-adaption of mass-circulation papers which is particularly evident at the present time: whether it be a response to the perceived growth of the 'urban black middle class', or a co-option of the business community which makes a certain Johannesburg morning newspaper (aimed primarily at city businessmen) find it expedient to tone down its 'radical' image.

Parallels such as these provide us with new insights into the function and position of the media at any particular historical conjuncture. During periods of crises they may, or more correctly those who write and publish them may, actively create new ideological configurations to come to terms with problems facing particular class-groupings. During periods of relative stability, it might be expected that the media will reiterate ideological positions previously enunciated. At all times, the format, circulation and marketing strategy of different media are valuable barometers to the state and the status of the audiences they serve.

The challenge for students of the media is clear. Buried in the stacks of libraries throughout the country, long forgotten by even those for whom they were written, and often quite unknown to social scientists and historians investigating the audiences they served, lies a wealth of printed material. Journals, magazines and newspapers, covering not only the professional and occupational interests of various groupings, but also their social and economic needs, how they related to other groups and to their contemporary situation, and in fact how they viewed their own positions, wait to be sifted through. Belinda Bozzoli has convincingly demonstrated how critical use of these media, when placed in a broader politico-economic framework, can provide fascinating glimpses into both the media themselves, and the people they served.

Reference

Gramsci, A. 1971: Selections From Prison Notebooks. Lawrence and Wishart, London
