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Title	*Political Perspectives to State Censorship of Literature*
Description	Peter McDonald and David Robertson discuss the idea of state censorship, especially Apartheid era South Africa, looking at the political perspectives and implications of state censorship of literature
Presenter(s)	Peter McDonald and David Robertson
Recording	http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/censorship/pmcdonald03.mp3
Keywords	literature, censorship, apartheid, south africa, nationalism, politics, racism, liberty, free speech, Q323, L214, 1
Part of series	*Censorship in Literature in South Africa*

Peter McDonald So my name's Peter MacDonald, I'm one of the English fellows at St Hugh's College. I study and do research and teach literature from the eighteen eighties really to the present day. And one of the reason's I'm in this conversation is now is I've just written a book about Apartheid censorship called 'The Literature Police' and it's a book that links up with a number of other fields and enquiries, so opens up the possibilities of the discussion of a inter-disciplinary kind.

And so I'm in conversation at this moment with my college at St Hugh's, David Robinson.

David Robinson I am David Robinson, I'm a Professor of Politics at the University as well as a fellow at St Hugh's. And I'm primarily I suppose a political sociologist and most of the interests that I have which I share with Peter come from that part of my being. I also increasingly, work more or less as a constitutional lawyer.

The other thing that he and I have often spoken about which clearly touches on this are constitutional doctrines of freedom of speech, what sort of defences [[?? 0:01:08]] courts system will accept and understand. And in fact in forthcoming book of mine there is a major section on South Africa and the Constitutional Court a part of which does focus around post-apartheid censorship problems.

Peter McDonald Great.

David Robinson One of the things that actually did surprise me coming to your book Peter, was - and this is just ignorance on my part really - was in a sense how late and from my point of view, how curiously late the setting up of a serious censorship regime in South Africa was. Knowing nothing about it I'd just assumed it was a matter of inheritance of the nineteenth centuries, it was in I'd say in the United Kingdom or certainly an early twentieth century phenomena as with the United States Supreme Court.

The fact that in some ways it didn't really get going until the 1950s when the rest of the, let's call it 'western world' or whatever the rest of the cultural units that South Africa must have seen itself in, were at really quite a rapid rate, peeling away all forms of censorship.

So although that immediately surprised me and I dug around in the book for explanations of this. And the one that I picked up - and I'd really like to talk about and ask you about - is the way in which it appears to have started - or much of the drive of censorship - appears to have started

from an attempt by the Afrikaner intellectual cultural elite to protect or perhaps to create their own ethnic national identity. Whereas more normally censorship has been a matter, quite literally of protecting a moral sense.

I tended to get the feeling here that protection of the young and impressionable Afrikaners from immorality, was more the surface, if you like the justifying argument for a much deeper attempt to either protect or even to create an ethnicity. Now I have my own – which I won't mention yet - my own guess as to why that might have been the case. But first of all, is that roughly right?

Peter McDonald I think it is right, just one caveat I would add really is that I think - so just very quickly in terms of the history of South Africa just a little bit of detail to add in there. It's crucial to remember that the Afrikaner Nationalist, the National Party which is the kind of the political expression of Afrikaner nationalism at its fullest, only comes to power in 1948.

So until then you have from 1910 the creation of the union of South Africa, until 1948 you have various tensions around a largely Anglo-file united party. There's number of political configurations but it's broadly if you like, one that looks towards Britain still and the one that is much more strongly separatist. There's all sorts of version in which that grows up and so on but eventually the separatist ambition is articulated politically in 1948 with the National Party's victory and it's after that that you move towards grand apartheid being set up.

So the initial censorship board which was set up primarily as most countries around the world were in the beginning of the 20th century, started to deal with film when Governments around the world had much greater concerns about the consequences of film. So the first board of censors really covered mainly film and that was set up in the early nineteen thirties.

David Robinson Following an Irish model I think you said which...?

Peter McDonald Based on an Irish model, you're absolutely right. Based on an Irish model in the sense that it was a Government body where as in the United States and in the UK it had been industry based which actually resisted going to making it a Governmental body. So you had this censorship board there, in fact its powers did get extended in the later thirties to imported books as well as film and so on.

The interesting thing is, that system is in place and then in the forties and into the early fifties, the real driver initially for apartheid censorship is not so much an intellectual elite. In fact the intellectual elite are opposed to the driving force behind censorship which is the church groups and it's interestingly it was mainly Dutch reformed church groups. So it was a clerical Afrikaner elite that was calling for this with moral anxiety, anxieties about the moral depredation of the Volk and the young people.

But interestingly also the Catholic Church was involved the Anglican Church was involved, Jewish groups were involved. There was a lot of agitation from many church groups in the forties.

David Robinson I was going to ask that because I mean on an alternative sociological take is what some people have called a moral panic and would expect - in fact I specifically meant to ask whether the Catholics got in on this. Because throughout Europe they were still of course clinging to a fear of, if you like, a genuine fear, misplaced but a genuine fear that people would do immoral things as opposed to an attempt to `[[pop-up 0:06:26]]` create an identity for the people. So that is genuine is it at the beginning, it really is a religiously motivated reaction to immorality?

Peter McDonald Exactly but also interestingly it fits in precisely with all the anxieties - in fact they refer to it and cite all the anxieties going on in Canada, United States and Britain about the spread of pornography. That the greater dissemination of pornography, easier access, so you know you get a Fredrick Worthams book which they site, again you know the seduction of the innocence.

Also about comic books actually, you know horror comics and action comics that these are having a morally damaging effect on the young. So that's a wide spread panic and it's the Afrikaner church group and other church groups in South Africa are certainly part of that. They're also their differences but they're...

David Robinson Do they see, because the reason for or perhaps I maybe was mistaken reading your book but one thing that keeps cropping up is the reference by the Afrikaner elitist to the problems of the urbanisations of the society. So do they see their population as peculiarly at risk to moral contamination because unlike the English whites, they haven't if you like, they're not inoculated to it, there are these poor innocent farm boys and girls who because they may not stay on the farm are vulnerable in a way that others might not be and therefore especially needing protection? Is this an element of that?

Peter McDonald Absolutely right. I mean in a sense it's their anxieties, and this is where their anxieties do start to shift into the intellectual elite in the fifties, once the Government decides that it is going to set up a censorship system to cover internally produced books as well as imported books, that's the crucial difference. The board doesn't cover internally produced books until the nineteen sixties.

David Robinson Is there any reason for that or was it just that they never crossed the line initially that good local guides...

Peter McDonald They come to the courts handle them in the usual way that you would say...

David Robinson [[?? 0:08:33]]

Peter McDonald Yes that's right there was no need to have a board covering them. You are absolutely right that there's the two, the intellectuals and what will interest you is the leading figure behind the Commission of Enquiries that set up the 'Undesirable Publications' was actually a sociologist.

David Robinson Yes I noticed that with some pleasure.

Peter McDonald A man called Geoffrey Cronje who is unique in the otherwise always unhappy story of apartheid ideologues. He's kind of an extreme case in many ways. But anyway he was particularly exercised by, at that point also the depredations and damage of mass culture.

Also that mass culture is associated with cities, it is urban cultures and definitely the sense that you've got a rural... the sense of the Afrikaners is deeply attached to the farm, deeply attached to rural backgrounds but now moving into the cities and what this is going to do to the Volk. So that demographic factor is behind it as well.

David Robinson And I should remind you [[?? 0:09:39]] that it's only in Britain and Continental Europe that sociologists were assumed to be left wing. Most American sociology departments are centre-right, however.

Perhaps if I were to explain why I was so intrigued by this. It really evolved stepping back and assuming I hadn't read your book and know nothing about it. If somebody tells you that there was a major effort, state sponsored efforts to censor publications in South Africa - well you might have guessed that - and you'd immediately assume that it was about, and only about racial conflict. And that the protection of young Afrikaner lads from [[?? 0:10:21]] was never more than facade, that this was justification, it was protecting the state or the state power and the state war, black versus white boundaries. And that's the story in a sense that I expected to read in your book.

I wasn't prepared really for this if you like, autonomous protection, either of the churches or the protection of a sense of morality or the ethnic protection for the Afrikaner people, Afrikaner

literature, Afrikaner culture, which is of course what makes them all the more fascinating that that was there.

But at what point then does this shift? Because I'm guessing that however genuinely tied up it was with a much more worldwide traditional, more or less fear of the twentieth century and however much it was initially tied up with the need to protect the Afrikaans special vision of the world, at some stage or probably before very long, that did slip more and more into being not a false consciousness but a mendacious consciousness.

It's a story you're telling to justify a much simpler thing which is keeping the blacks in their places tied up with genuine [[?? 0:11:43]]. And even in the constitutional courtroom in the cases I've heard and read there is this fascination with the notion of pictures that show white women or black men - I'm sure there was always that sort of [[?? 0:11:58]] side - but there must have come a time when all of this stuff became much more of a facade.

When and how is it relevant?

Peter McDonald There's perhaps just one extra thing that we need to add to what we were just saying now about the Afrikaner community.

I mean one of the things that interesting is also in terms of apartheid thinking is, the thinking that the Afrikaner applied to themselves about being rural, about moving into this new urban modernity, mass culture etc, etc, makes sometimes someone like Geoffrey Cronje sound a bit like F.R. Leavis actually the English critic, anxieties about mass culture and so on. They are saying that's exactly how they wanted to understand, by that point of course completely atavistic ways, they wanted to understand all South Africa's African communities.

They were also understand as a rural as particular ethnicities and so on, so in a sense apartheid was a vision of everybody being a Volk, whether you're Xhosa speaker or Zulu speaker or an Afrikaans speaker, you're a member of the Volk.

Of course politically there had been a modernising nationalising movement within black politics and resistance politics since the turn of the century. And the greatest expression of that in the nineteen twelve is the ANC, the African National Congress to set up, that [[?? 0:13:25]]. So that permeated the system so it emerges in a sense that they're not only anxious about young Afrikaner men reading porn magazines. They're also anxious about young urban blacks reading a magazine like 'Drum' which is all about a kind of an Americanised commercial mass culture.

It's not about you as interested in your rural cultural practices you know, which are of a particular kind. Kind of an anthropological sense of what isiXhosa culture would be like. You've now gone into this deformed debasing modernising time. So it's a de-triblisation, that sort of anxiety. It's a similar playing through in those ways.

David Robinson I hear you and indeed I picked up some of that in the book but am I supposed to take that seriously? Am I supposed to believe that they believed this? Or that for example worrying about 'Drum' – which is an interesting point that I did note - has much more to do with closing down the information frontiers.

Let me take a completely different front analogy. One of the things that finally destroyed the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe was the increasing ability of the ordinary guys in Poland Czechoslovakia, whatever, to actually see how much different life was for working lads in America or for that matter in France. They could no longer hold the information barriers. People could see that ordinary people really did have jeans, iPod's etc, etc.

Now to what extend is the stuff like 'Drum' and similar matters an attempt to deny young South African blacks the sense that life could be other?

Peter McDonald I mean I think, I would have thought, I'm always hesitant about motive because it's so difficult to know these things but I would have thought there were at least as many people

opportunistically committed to that belief as there were people who genuinely believed that this is what culture was. That there was some sort of authentic linguistic and communal culture that needed to be preserved and that modernity was in many ways, a threat to it. I mean I think there was quite a wide spread conception of the way things were at that point.

But the crucial point also to come back to your earlier question, to link that up was that I think you're quite right there're issues of certainly false and into mendacious consciousness and the wonderful Lucasian distinction. But I would say that it really probably does come in the late 1950s in the course of the fifties and in a sense the censorship system oddly plays into that. Because the Commission of Enquiries set up in the mid 1950s, it reports in the late 1950s, in 1957 in fact, the Government does absolutely nothing about it. Yes typically Governments used to sit on reports until Sharpeville.

Sharpeville then happens in March 1960 and then the move starts up to now set up fully blown censorship within South Africa and I think that's probably an articulation of when you've decisively moved into mendacious consciousness.

And in an interesting way I suppose, the moment at which grand apartheid under Verwoerd we're talking about here H.F. Verwoerd the Prime Minister at that point, the moment that grand apartheid gets set up is the moment that it also becomes mendacious. It's the moment that they really are starting to articulate the whole notion of `[[?? 0:17:11]]` separate nations, territorially defined and so on and so forth.

David Robinson I mean I share your suspicion of talking about motivation, I have a particular reason for that which I'll come to in the moment or so. But all ethnic groups, all cultural defence groups face a problem with articulation that they have to explain to themselves as much as the rest of the world, why they're under threat or rather, why it matters that they're under threat.

I mean take another trivial but quite useful example, the protection of the Welsh language - which is insidiously sort after and often supported by UK central Government to people's surprise - is deeply unpopular in large parts of Wales who don't want all those extra hours of Welsh language television, they want what the rest of us want. Now the notion that people will actually simply stop talking Welsh because it's not very useful and not particularly interesting is something that has to be defended against.

Now at least there is a Welsh language which has existed for really rather a long time. One of the things that I kept wanting to know about and since you don't for good reason, particularly don't really touch on is how authentic and how long term authentic the Afrikaans ethnic culture was anyway, how much of it was. I mean it's not a very large population there can't have been many writers for a very long time?

Peter MacDonald It's obviously a crucial point and it's one of the real differences between say the ways in which Afrikaners would be thinking about this question and against the Welsh where the Welsh there's a long history of the Welsh language you know, going back centuries that the Afrikaners, of course the language has it's origins in Dutch and in fact for Afrikaners apartheid was initially applied to themselves in relation to Dutch and in relation to British.

So British colonial power, Dutch if you like, previously colonial as well but cultural and linguistic and the separate movement, the movement towards an Afrikaans language is the number of language movements that start in the late nineteen century. So it's the late 1870s really when the languages become self consciously now built into the development of a separate ethnic identity which then eventually gets nationalised and you get the idea of this ethno-linguistic Volk. So it really is rather young and in fact the first cultural history of the Afrikaner as a separate ethno-linguistic Volk is only published in nineteen forty five.

David Robinson I mean I have suspected that it must be something a long those lines and it is quite important because the lack of longevity takes away a very large part of the justification of it. I

mean if you take the Welsh example still, it's not a very good one but it will do. If you say to a Welsh language advocate "Well look, truth is, you're eighteen year old guys don't want to speak Welsh, why should they, why should we just not let it die?" Part of the answer is because it's been around for a very long time.

Okay it's not a rational answer but it's very powerful and motive answer. It's absurd to let the laziness of an eighteen overcome the fact that there's a huge history, a huge genuine cultural background here. That argument is vastly less available presumably to an Afrikaans cultural leader and indeed the stuff which I've read from your citations, there isn't even much of an effort to fake it. I mean one thing we do know about in Europe about ethnic appeals is the ethnic history is often wholesale fabricated at least as far as I can see the Afrikaners didn't try to create an entirely fake cultural history.

Peter MacDonald No, I mean that's right they didn't but the cultural dimension of the project was vital and I think the one thing we perhaps need to add here which links back to the discussion I had with [[?? 0:21:28]]. Where one of the interesting things that starts to happen in the censorship system - and that was for me the most surprising thing - was in fact the people who get control of the censorship system are doing so, are a particular faction within Afrikaans elite culture, intellectual culture.

And their anxiety is not simply to protect the Volk and to protect that idea of Volk culture but what their main anxiety is and the reason why they're willing to compromise to the extent to be at the heart of what is obviously a repressive system is that they don't want the clerical elite or the political elite to have control over the definition of what the Volk is.

They want writers to have the control, they see writers if you like as the guardians of the Volk spirit and the precise reason for that is, they are not romantic nationalists of the nineteenth century mould they're modernist nationalists because they believe that that spirit if you like can never be characterised and never be defined and closed down, it's always open. But the trouble is the clerical and political league want to closet it down and define it and say "This is what we're defending."

So that's the other thing that's very anomalous.

David Robinson And that is fascinating, I can think of no analogue to that by the way in any other...partly because it does seem a little bit of a contradictory, I mean you're happy with the idea of modernism and soul, the notion of a modernist ethnic appeal is, let's say, intellectually problematic.

Peter McDonald Absolutely. Well they had a term for this position, it was called in Afrikaans,' Lojale verset' which you can basically translate as 'Loyal opposition' or 'Loyal protest'. So there's a basic commitment to the idea of the Afrikaner as a Volk, that's how we understand the community, only in those terms. But they are protesting against, if you like, the dominant definitions of that.

David Robinson Is, this is slightly at a tangent but it's just a question that was nagging me last night when I was looking back over your book. You know the ways in which artist tend to just focus on the fact that the culture's being defended are high culture and take actually rather little notice of what the guy in the street is reading. Is Afrikaans or was Afrikaans at that stage, Afrikaans culture entirely high culture? Where there people writing just ordinary thrillers or whatever in Afrikaans?

Peter McDonald Absolutely. In fact that was one of the motivating forces. It's one of the reasons why for me this otherwise entirely boring and dry. Actually it's not, it is dry and dull. The Commission of Enquiries in the 1950s the Cronje Commission of nineteen fifty six into undesirable publications, one of the things that was so fascinating about it as a document is that when they, first of all they focused so much on Afrikaans literature, that was odd.

And the second thing was rarely major anxiety was the fact that too many Afrikaans writers were borrowing crime fiction, thriller, models of writing from America. It was the Americanisation which they saw as the vulgarisation of Afrikaans culture.

David Robinson I picked up with pleasure because [[?? 0:24:46]].

Peter McDonald [[?? 0:24:47]] exactly. This is the big problem and so even at that level of this commission of enquiry they are trying to pass themselves off as "The reason why we're setting up the system is to defend the high integrity of Afrikaans literary culture because it's being eroded by these imports and the mimicking imports." The Afrikaans popular writers mimicking the stuff which is being disseminated by the new publishing houses within Afrikaans publishing houses that are going for a mass market.

David Robinson It does circle round a bit but you'll, presumably you know, it's in the book but Richard Hoggarts famous 'The Uses of Literacy'. One of the problems about that book when it came out, was it starting making good intellectual liberals somewhat wary to apparent freedom of speech, when they realised, well education if you like, when they realised what happened when you educated somebody so when they left school at fifteen but able to read, what they chose to read was not what they wanted to defend.

And that must have been a real problem for them. You don't have a big literature, it's under threat internally by people writing what the guys actually want to read. So it's a little bit of a power play by, not a little bit...

Peter McDonald Exactly. A large bit of power play.

David Robinson To get back to the reason I initially asked about the motivation [[?? 0:26:05]] consciousness thing was it's, I agree that we can't easily talk about that in global terms. But there is a particular motivation question here - and one of the things that makes all your work fascinating - the censorship machine didn't just happen it had to be staffed, there had to people and I know you've spent a large part of it digging into this. It had to be staffed by people being prepared to being the censors.

Now I can understand how, whether genuine or not, at least enough to keep your own soul quiet, you could accept the role of censor when it was some how or another tied up with cultural purity etc, etc. But when we get to much later cases, like say the eighties and so on and I just marked this in the book at one particular one. You get a case, this involved the prosecution of a [[?? 0:26:56]], in English terms 'The prosecution of a book', where Sam Black was initiated on [[?? 0:27:04]] into the well documented horrors of state violence where he's called on to investigate.

Now the people actually writing this censorship reports there were more or less prepared to say this was awful and it was a completed false picture of South African culture which was being presented. At that stage it is at best mendacious consciousness isn't it? In other words the motivation of the actors who made the system work must have changed. Either it's a different sort of person, I don't know, you probably have dated all this but I'm afraid I haven't picked this up and whole sort of different sort of guy becomes the censor or the very least the story the tell himself at home at night must have changed radically?

Peter McDonald I think it's probably to do with the division between the security censors and the literary censors. So for instance what you are talking about there is the shift in anxiety in the late seventies actually, in the 1970sfrom in the sixties there had been lots of anxiety simply as you would expect about racial mixing, that was kind of the chief political obvious moral/ political...

David Robinson Miscegenation.

Peter McDonald Miscegenation exactly. Then in the seventies, the issue becomes depicting what's going on in prisons cells and torture and those claims. What's interesting is in terms of mendacious consciousness it's the security censors who are I suppose unsurprisingly the greatest articulators of the idea that this is a deformed notion of this is not true, this is not what's going on. And so in fact I think the bit that you were reading there was a political philosophy professor at the University of Cape Town called A.H Murray who is certainly of the view that this is simply false. An intelligent man but I mean, what on earth was he thinking about, what was he reading?

Because at the same time, you'll find in other contexts literary censors saying "Hang on but the reason why we can't ban this is this stuff's being reported everyday in the newspapers." So there's an extraordinary kind of schizophrenia if you like, even within the censors themselves between the people who are obviously in some deep sense mendacious about the world that they're living in. And there are people who are saying "Well hang on." You know...

David Robinson Well this is why the, what Americans sort of call the redeeming social value, the social merit stuff comes to play much more a part because you can't deny that blacks are being treated like this but need not be any good literary reason for saying it. Is that how it works?

Peter McDonald Well when the literary censors say, the literary censors defending work which they deem to be great literature which is about torture, say for instance J.M Coetzee's 'Waiting for the Barbarians', they're going to say "Well..." Well again as soon as I'm saying this they are of course counter examples because the whole thing is, in many ways arbitrary.

But they will be saying "Because this is a great work of literature we can let it through because anyway it's not saying anymore than the newspapers are saying."

David Robinson Oh I see that's how it works yes.

Peter McDonald But no then equally it can work the other way around they can say "Well hang on this is a great work of literature." So for instance Nadine Gordon was [[?? 0:30:32]] in the 1960s, "This is a great work of literature which is reporting exactly what's going on in the newspapers everyday. But the trouble is, it's a literature and therefore it's reporting it that much more powerfully so it's going to be dangerous and we have to ban it." So they banned that.

So this is again partly to do with the kind of absurdity of the decision making process as to what factors would be counted in some cases and who was making the decision in other cases.

David Robinson Is there [[?? 0:31:00]] question, is there a shift in the sort of people who staff these positions as it gets later or...?

Peter McDonald Yes there's a major change in the nature of the...there's a remarkable degree of continuity, it has to be said but the structure changes dramatically in the mid 1970s. From the sixties to the mid 1970syou basically have a fairly small elite board effectively making all the decisions. From the mid 1970syou have an administrative bureaucracy and then a devolved series of committees that are making the decisions. And because some of those committees are security committees and some are literary committees, their decisions can be very different. So there is a big change there.

David Robinson That does make sense. Should we move to my other particular interest which is, I mean I know that unlike many people in your field you actually have read a good deal of social science stuff. And you're familiar with what [[?? 0:32:01]] to be called 'The New Institutionalism', an effort to describe and explain my case, political behaviour in terms of the roles that the institutions themselves, parliaments or courts or whatever, impose on people.

So I mean my own work on courts, if you're a member of the court, if you're a judge of a court, you're not just a judge in a traditional way you're a very specified inhabitant of a particular role

you know, quite complexly articulated institution, you basically have a job to do. And a lot of our, well at least the way I do it, a lot of the explanation carried out in terms of people trying to come to terms with, trying to understand what it is, what their job is.

You're a judge, okay but what is it to be a judge? And then making decisions in terms of what's often called a logic of appropriateness. Such a resolution to a case is the one determined by the appropriateness of it given my job description.

As simple as that, I think there's another form of institutionalism which is on new institutions usually called 'A rational choice institutionalism', where the institution is seen effectively as a playing field or a battle field if you like of the institutional rules set up a schedule of payoffs for particular rational actions, so the U.S senate becomes other playing field in which individual senators maximise their own utility by using the rules according to the pre-set incentive structure.

They're not incompatible, well actually I think they are incompatible, most of my colleagues think they are not incompatible but there are two different takes on seeing the world as institutional.

Now for most people the notion of literature just has nothing to do with this but if we take a book like yours, it's impossible to say that, there are clear roles here, there are institutions, there are censors, there are writers, there are publishers, there are literary critics and you don't go to work in the morning as a literary critic without going to a newspaper institution, without having a job description, perhaps a inchoate one but you are playing a role. You're clearly playing a role as a censor, you're probably paid on civil service rates or something.

You may well have, in this case, a detailed written job description but all of this have, they are roles and complex institutions. I haven't dared say that to be writer is to be a role player. Let me ask you that first of all, does it make any sense at all to apply that sort of institutional analysis to the actual creators of literature, to the writers, the poets or are they outside it feeding into?

Peter McDonald No I think it's a vital thing and for me certainly I was driven to your field and in particular to what you call the 'New Institutionalism,' the people like March and Olsen in the mid nineteen eighties is where it came in and I was just particularly struck by the things they were saying where what they saw themselves as reacting against with if you like, certain kinds of rational choice theory on one side and then often certain kinds of fairly vulgarised forms of Marxist thinking.

David Robinson That and the sort of thing was rampant behaviourism.

Peter McDonald Right okay and rampant behaviourism. For me, coming from within, what they were saying, but coming from within thinking about literature studies and how that has been developing I suppose I was caught between on the one hand, although most people would probably disavow this but nonetheless, a methodological individualism that was I think heavily invested in certain conception, certain liberal kinds of thinking.

On the other hand, there was a kind of reductive sociologism derived from certain kinds of Marxist theory so in the Marxist model you just think about "What's the class of the author?" on the crudest model of that. Whereas on the other model we're just thinking about the author, this wonderful supple endlessly nuanced individual.

David Robinson And you try to ignore the fact that somebody owns the publishing house?

Peter McDonald That's right and you have no interest at all in institutions and how they work. So for me actually getting out of that kind un-pass, on the one hand reductive sociologism and the other hand reductive individualism, putting the institution in place which I derived partly from French sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu but also what was going on in a field called 'Book history' where it was just the history of the book was just paying more attention to publishers and how they work.

So adding all of that into the mix, suddenly for us as a way out of that kind of intellectual un-pass and then of course yes you have to start to understand a literature as an institution in terms of who are the guardians of the literary space in a culture at a certain point. Its publishers, its reviewers, its literary critics, its academics, its archivists, its librarians, all of these kinds of things intersect to create and sustain a literary culture.

But then of course it then opens up the question about writers themselves as role players within that institution. And I would say yes of course you need to understand writers as role players as playing if you like, scripted parts.

But maybe what's interesting about it from the writer's point of view is unlike say the publisher, where of course the role will be evolving and changing and getting - you know, over time, it won't be static - with a relative degree of stasis on the role of the publisher. Whereas what seems to be for a certainly a lot of writers but not all of them, is that the role itself is often in crisis, is put seriously in question.

Writers will understand themselves as inheriting a particular conception of say, what it mean to be a novelist, what it means to perform that role. To be some sort of say, you know in the early twentieth century to be some Victorian sage, who is commenting on our life and times, that's the role of the writer.

And a lot of writers will come along and be very uneasy with that role with the part that's been scripted for them by the literary culture that they've inherited. And they will radically reject that role. Not only sociologically as it were, in terms of I pooh, pooh that particular conception of the writer but even in terms of their writing practice. So it's not that the role is some how external to how they write but that they develop their writing in a certain way.

So for instance this is a very benial point about the modernist novel but for instance the modernist novel, people like Joyce Wolfe and so on try to strip away the sort of third person narrating sage like voice for the Victorian novel and they remove that authority from the novel all together. And all you get instead is plunged into this kind of internal and external dialogues of particular characters with no authorial commentary.

David Robinson I mean the tricky thing for me and as this goes on I'm feeling more and more a sociologist and less and less interested in literature. But from the point of view of the sociologist, you see our use of `[[role 0:39:31]]` theory and so on isn't as it were just an extra option or whatever. It's that we don't really have any very clear sense of there being anything else to the individual other than the role.

The problem with your model, and I mean I of course bow to your understanding, is that it seems to connote some core thing called *writing*. And then you don't like the way *writing* is currently institutionalised so you do something else. But it's terribly unclear to me what, except on some really atavistic level the desire to scribble what to be a writer is unless it's to be a writer of this or a writer of that, a writer who sees his job as, and so on.

The notion of rejecting other existing models to do it in your own way is, okay there are parallels. `[[I mean something I 0:40:22]]` know much more about it that history of art where you get the slow but by now total shift of the artist from being the artisan who makes things to satisfy a market to somebody who regards the market with contempt. And indeed becomes a matter we've just proved, what an awful philistine you are if you want to buy something that you would like as opposed to what the artist tells you is his work.

I mean I suppose in a bit it's a bit like that with literature but I do tend to feel that there are pretty fixed roles. Okay roles can change you can develop and you write and publish. Publishers may develop their role but what we're talking about then is deciding to go into mix media, deciding to sell or to produce podcasts rather than just books. It's still the activity, there's not doubt about what publishing is. How does it work for writers, is there that sort of inner corium `[[writerlyness 0:41:21]]`?

Peter McDonald No definitely I would have thought that if we start to talk about an inner core of writerlyness, that would be getting into some sort of version of individualism again.

David Robinson Well this [[?? 0:41:33]].

Peter McDonald I feel that sort of creeping in. Two things I'd say about that; on the one hand there's definitely a sense as we see with the history of writing is that these reactions against established notions of the role are often collective. They're often groups of writers who are forming collectivities, who are forming parts of movements. So this is again where a sociological analysis is indispensable. And they tend to be - even though they are writing very differently in all sorts of singular ways, nonetheless the challenge that they're posing to an established notion of the writer's role is rather similar.

There's not a core writerlyness that's driving that, it's hugely over determined, those changes of roles. But it is a clear repudiation of the established role and therefore of course the established expectations of the culture. Of what they're expecting from you as a writer, your readers but also publishers, all the other people who are the guardians of that institution at that time. And they're therefore, some of them finding it very difficult to get published because people just don't accept this as sometimes legitimate or certainly as commercially viable. So they would often be struggling and some of them would therefore self publish initially and then be picked up by the culture.

David Robinson Well sociologically it is interesting because the only way you can get away with this is to live inside a culture which has in many ways sort of permanent [[Nietzsche 0:43:09]] guilt feeling so that publishers and readers themselves feel a bit guilty about not liking this strange weird thing by this guy called Joyce. The reader will make himself plough through the all two million pages of that book. The publisher will publish it even if he a bit worried about the balance sheet, out of a sort of cultural cringe almost if you like.

And that's what visual artists have succeeded, they've managed to invert if you like, the power balances in the whole art game so that the rest of us can go around a bit frightened of ignoring the [[?? 0:43:46]]... well you can see my point. Writers are getting there or trying to get there?

Peter McDonald Well the interesting thing is, when you look at it at a longer time spam, you know you look at yes, something like Joyce's Ulysses emerges in nineteen twenty two, you can't get it published in Britain because of legal reasons because it's obscene and so it's published in Paris by a small publishing company initially for a very, very select group of subscribers, it's in fact more or less published by subscription initially. Of course now the first edition of Ulysses is a highly priced and incredibly expensive, so you can see from the point of view of economics, this is a long term economic cycle if you like, the book gains its value in that way.

But flash forward to the nineteen sixties, Penguin brings out a mass market paperback edition of Joyce's Ulysses, it's not in a completely different world, it's not longer this book that seemed to be a threat to, I mean one of the first reviewers called it literary bolshevism, a threat to the social order. It's now widely available as a mass market paperback feeding into the new university system because it's being prescribed on university courses becoming part of mass education.

So it's moving over time all the time and writer's relationship to the culture is constantly dynamic in that sense.

David Robinson I mean I understand that, it's not that mysterious one can perfectly well unpick the course of mechanisms that does involve particular graduate students reading books, beginning to be assistant Professors, getting to be head of departments, writing curricular. More and more generations of graduates, all of whom loath the book but you've invested so much time in it that

you then teach. I mean one can unpick it but the consequence if you like from metasociology is what they've actually done is invert a power balance.

You've gone from a situation where willing readers and commercially orientated publishers find themselves having to do something quite different. The fact that we can spell out the mechanism doesn't make it any less of an inversion. It is essentially an inversion of a power balance.

Peter McDonald I think that's it but again what you would need in order to understand that is quite a complex and elaborate institutional analysis. So I'd stick with the institution.

David Robinson Sorry perhaps I misspoke I wasn't - I can give you a fact I know we have in private conversation; one of my intellectual heroes was an American sociologist called Goffman who wrote about what he called 'total institutions', prisons, mental hospitals and so on. And makes the point that the apparent power balance you'd expect; wardens being in charge, doctors being in charge, is often completely false. Because put somebody in the position of being a mental hospital inmate, prisoner; there is so little to loose that your not bound, you have incentive to play by any rules and they end up in mini context actually wielding the power.

You can completely throw the nice doctor in the white coat by responding in an inappropriate unpredictable way but he is bound by rules. I just cite that as an example of what the detailed institutional analysis, I have no doubt that we need to do that and I'm intrigued that literature does work.

Peter McDonald I think that that would again be quite an interesting way of thinking about literary history because it would be if you like initially these writers start of as being marginal, eccentric, odd, and then there is an inversion of power over the time. But then in many ways for the new generation of writers that emerges that becomes the problem because now these figures with what is the established accepted notion of the literary culture and we can't identify with that.

David Robinson Absolutely but it seems to follow one rule of sociology which is there is no such thing as a successful counter-revolution. Because what you can't `[[?? 0:47:36]]` again I mean throughout history. What you get nowadays is there are few people plaintively saying "There isn't really anything wrong with direct `[[?? 0:47:44]]` of objects." And then people say "Yes there is," and bang!

You couldn't really go back could you to being a nineteenth century sage type novelist informing the public of what they should believe. It's the counter-revolution isn't available it's the ratchet effect, every time you move one stage and that's it.

Peter McDonald Except I would say, one of the things is those sorts of expectations can survive a long time; you get them built into prizes for instance. I mean like the Nobel prize for literature that grows out of the nineteenth century, it's given to writers as great sages and so on and so forth but the prize survives. But I'm just thinking about actually it brings us to the South Africa.

I mean J.M Coetzee was very uneasy about the implications of being awarded the Nobel prize because of his history. And certainly he commented in public, "I'd be very uncomfortable in the role that the prize is ascribing to me as some sort of Victorian sage."

And so it survives in prizes, it survives in peoples expectations, it survives in the way that reviewers think about an review things. But also in a sense literary culture is always complex because there is yes an 'avant garde' constantly changing the rules in some ways. But there are all sorts of popular forms of writing where older ideas will survive for quite a long time.

So the idea of, if you like, in some good, uplifting popular literature the idea of the author as somebody who can relay important moral incites about the world, that would still be around.

David Robinson I did want to bring it ultimately about South Africa by asking about the role that the creators of literature; writes, perks, play writes, whatever, inside the Afrikaans community. How conscious they were - and this would not be false consciousness or mendacious consciousness it would simply be accepting this is what it was to be. How much do you think they did take on a sense that their job as a writer was to promulgate certain values and so on so that an acquiescence in censorship which upheld that would be, in a sense, quite acceptable? You could go home and night and tell yourself the story, without any cringe as it were?

Peter McDonald But the interesting thing is going back to where we were talking about a moments ago is in fact that that idea of the role of the writer to promulgate certain values of the community, which also meant that the writer had a certain sense of responsibility to the community, not to upset the communities valued too much. That was the mainstream conservative view of what the writer was.

The group that I've called the 'Volk Avant Garde' and the group who actually had a very strong influence over the censorship system rejected that view out of hand because it in a sense rejected the idea that values weren't always up for question and always in the process of being made. You're assuming that values are fixed and that they are there to be defended.

David Robinson That takes you back to your modernist `[[Methodist 0:50:57]]`.

Peter McDonald Exactly.

David Robison And we can part with my saying I really believe that's a contradiction in terms.

Peter McDonald I couldn't agree more.
