
THE PAST IS PRESENT: A FREETHINKER JOURNALIST, IDEOLOGIES AND LOYAL DISSENT

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has moved from an authoritarian state to a supposedly liberal democracy, with journalists as the assigned “watchdogs” of government. What can be learnt from a journalist who not only worked during apartheid South Africa, but also for a company whose raison d’être was to support the specific ethnic nationalist ideology of the government of the day? Rykie van Reenen is regarded by one South African historian as “undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the [twentieth] century”, later to be qualified by “possibly”. It is said her writing contributed in a significant way to the eventual change in Afrikaner Nationalist thinking. This article maps some of her dissentient writing to highlight her role as dissident journalist in a time of a kowtowing Afrikaans media sector. By referring to several examples, Van Reenen’s critical commentary on the Afrikaner Nationalist government will be discussed. Van Reenen can be called a freethinker, but her writing was still within Afrikaner Nationalism’s “loyal dissent” paradigm. The question arises: Can journalists free themselves from their own cultural backgrounds to become “watchdogs” of government and society? Taking into account that Van Reenen was critical of the government of the day, while still remaining an Afrikaner nationalist, with a lower case n, as she referred to herself, the author will ask how lessons can be learnt from the past and applied to the present. The article concludes with some observations on “independence” and “objectivity” as learned from the writings of Van Reenen.

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INTRODUCTION

This article reflects on the role of one of the most significant Afrikaans journalists of her time, according to some, and how she succeeded in developing a unique liberating voice together with other “liberal” journalists in the Afrikaans media when this sector kowtowed to its master, the National Party.

This journalist is Rykie van Reenen (1923-2003), according to preeminent South African historian Hermann Giliomee (2003: 564), “undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the [twentieth] century”. In a subsequent publication he qualified this estimation with the word “waarskynlik” (probably) (Giliomee 2004: 470). Van Reenen was widely regarded as a critical, simultaneously uniquely creative, voice in the Afrikaans media, criticising from within, as a loyal dissident.

The question is: How did a female journalist develop into such a role, given the patriarchal and hegemonic “Christelik-Nasionale” (Christian Nationalist) culture of her time, where women were relegated to being second class citizens as a result of various complex factors, the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism, and the grounding of this ideology in a conservative reformed theological paradigm according to which women were inferior to men?

APPROACH

This article uses the Cultural History School’s approach (Du Plooy 1997: 94) according to which research is concerned with “the study of famous figures ... and with the meaning ... ascribed to their actions”.

Mouton (2001: 171) says for the purposes of historical studies, it should be taken into account that sources of data are varied: official and unofficial, archival, personal documents such as letters and diaries and also public records. The strength of such a study is the “ability to reconstruct the past through narrative techniques” with the “emphasis on process and change”. According to Du Plooy (1997: 101) further advantages are that the historical research method in communication is holistic, is able to study a range of human communications, includes most communication research methods and provides social and cultural contexts with an “understanding of contemporary communication”.

The limitations, according to Mouton (2001: 171), are linked to the limitation of data, or to the understanding and judgment of the historian, or to theoretical perspectives which are contradictory. Du Plooy includes as limitation the fact that it requires a vast amount of data, that it is time consuming to collect and interpret data, and that the conclusions “are difficult to confirm or verify through replication” (Du Plooy 1997: 102). Still, one can conclude that “[e]xplanations in historical research are the means through which we are able to reconstruct the

past and understand it in its own terms” (Du Plooy 1997: 101). It should also be understood that history is “an interpretation of the past made by [white male] historians” (as cited in Rabe 2006a: 66). In this sense it should be accepted that history is not a record of the past, but a selection of data and other information, by [white male] historians.

Muller (1990: vii) quotes a Belgian historian who compared press history to an iceberg: That it is only the visible tip, “the ‘out’-ing of a mighty mass of history”. This historian also argues that no other branch of historiography “has so less own substance and is at the same time a function of the social, political, economic and cultural events”.

This researcher wishes to emphasise that media history has not included “her-story”, as has been argued in several articles (Rabe 2001; 2002; 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2009) as it has not included the history of those who were the *other* in terms of white male supremacy. The media, being an extension of a hegemonic white male worldview, have, not unsurprisingly, neglected to be inclusive, not only in practice, but also in recording these histories.

For the purposes of this article, historical data have been collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources, as is the nature of historiographical research. Besides this, certain own peer reviewed articles were revisited, and some of the data were used for the purposes of a publication on Van Reenen which attempted to record the role and importance of a journalist *extraordinaire* in Afrikaans media history (Rabe 2011).

To understand this past, and the context in which Van Reenen worked as a journalist (starting her career in 1945 and retiring formally in 1980), and to make “the past present”, a brief overview of South Africa as an authoritarian state will first be supplied as context, followed by a brief analysis of the South African media landscape, also as context. This will be followed with an overview of Van Reenen’s development as journalist, after which examples of her writings will be presented to illustrate the unique “Rykie” voice and her style of dissidence, described as an iron fist in a velvet glove. This will be followed by a brief discussion and conclusion of how journalistic lessons can and should be learnt from specifically this past for our current present – and how a journalist can and should, indeed, remain independent and a “loyal dissident”.

For the purposes of this article, some of the original Afrikaans quotations will be translated, and some presented with translations in parenthesis to show Van Reenen’s unique style.

CONTEXT

Van Reenen's macro environment: South Africa under apartheid

One can broadly state that Van Reenen lived and worked at a time when the remnants of colonialism and the full force of apartheid strangled South Africa. The South African socio-political context was an “extended colonialism” from 1652 until the first democratic elections in 1994, as argued by economist Sampie Terreblanche (2002: 3).

Terreblanche writes that the Act of Westminster which created the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910 (2002: 239- 248) entrenched white supremacy founded on racist capitalism (mostly the English industrial and mining establishment) and the Afrikaner agricultural establishment (2002: 240-241). British colonial socio-economic segregation was founded on segregation in all areas of society (Terreblanche 2002: 253). This segregation would form the foundation for Afrikaner Christian Nationalism. Ironically, this ideology was partly a response to the imperialism of British colonialism (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 96). The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism was fuelled by the years after the South African War (also referred to as the Anglo-Boer War) and those leading up to the First World War and the Rebellion (Terreblanche 2002: 248; Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 228-229).

One can argue that the “idealised epic myth” of the Great Trek as well as the mythologised heroism of the Boers against the British Empire during the South African War were fuelled by the Afrikaans Nationalist media of the (white) Afrikaner who became more and more economically empowered thanks to the pact between the “Afrikaner farming elite and a British/English business elite, and legitimised in terms of the segregationist ideology” (Terreblanche 2002: 248). The Afrikaners’ nationalist ideology was fuelled by the rise of German Nationalism in the first third of the previous century and the notion of a “Herrenvolk”, something the Afrikaner identified with (Terreblanche 2002: 301) and which led to the ideology of apartheid. During the latter years of apartheid, South Africa developed into a “securocratic” or militaristic police state (Terreblanche 2002: 314).

This restrictive environment also led to extremely restrictive legislation for the media, and formed the macro environment under which Van Reenen worked from 1945 to 1980.

Van Reenen's micro environment: South Africa's media landscape under apartheid

British colonialism/Afrikaner Nationalism also led to the fact that the South African press developed according to race and language. Wigston (2007: 44) argues that “[w]hereas in most countries, the press is usually categorised according to various

political affiliations, the South African press, from its very beginnings in the Cape Colony, has been organised in terms of race and language”.

The English press, originally in the hands of the South African English capitalist elite, was a so-called more liberal press, although they also served the interests of their constituency and therefore supported the status quo, namely the socio-economical racial segregationist legacy of British colonialism, and consequently, apartheid.

The Afrikaans press, as “organ” of the National Party, found itself in a privileged position during the apartheid years due to the close bond between party and media companies. A myriad of laws restricted the media, with various commissions of enquiry appointed by government to investigate the press (Wigston 2007: 44-50).

It has been said that apartheid South Africa’s media were the freest media in Africa. This is, of course, more an indication of the state of affairs on the rest of the African continent than complimentary to South Africa. The apartheid regime “declare[d] a commitment to press freedom in parliamentary debates” but threatened the press “unless [it] sorted itself out” (Wigston 2007: 45).

Since democratisation in 1994 media freedom is entrenched in the South African Constitution of 1996 (Article 16 in the Bill of Rights). South Africa’s media have developed to play an independent, so-called “watchdog” role in what is a supposedly liberal democracy.

The media establishment Van Reenen worked for, Naspers (previously Nasionale Pers, established as De Nasionale Pers in 1915 in Stellenbosch), developed from a partisan, parochial press company at its inception into a major world player, by redefining and reinventing itself through its almost ten decades.

It is at this company’s flagship newspaper, and generally accepted mouthpiece for the National Party, *Die Burger*, where Van Reenen started to work in 1945. Her independent, critical voice developed over the next few decades to that of an incisive commentator, one that never feared the white Afrikaner male hegemony of her time, but who criticised on the grounds of principle.

In 1965 Van Reenen was part of a selected group of journalists who established *Die Beeld*, Naspers’s first Sunday newspaper, and the company’s first newspaper beyond the Vaal River, in the then Transvaal. In 1970 *Die Beeld* and its rival *Dagbreek* from the other Afrikaner media company, Perskor, merged to form *Rapport* (as a result of Afrikaner political pressure).

Naspers has repositioned itself during the 1980s in the years before the advent of democracy, and after the first democratic elections in 1994, at a faster pace. From a print media company driven by an ethnic nationalistic ideology, it has grown

into a multimedia company and is, in its tenth decade, regarded as a global media player, ranked among the top ten media companies in the world.

VAN REENEN: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

This article will not analyse any of the many facets of a uniquely multi-faceted and multi-talented Van Reenen, but will focus on certain writings which can be interpreted as “subversive” (Meiring 2003: 8) for its time, the result of an independent thinker and commentator, and of a “loyal dissident”. First, however, a brief evaluation of Van Reenen as journalist will attempt to provide some context for her writing.

Van Reenen is not only regarded as a pioneering Afrikaans woman journalist, but by some as the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of her century. Her journalistic oeuvre ranged from specialist beat reporter and political and social commentator to an outstanding essayist, columnist and book critic. The expression “ryk, ryker, Rykie” (rich, richer, Rykie) developed in Afrikaans newsrooms, indicating certain degrees of comparison, and that Rykie herself was the ultimate standard.

The current chair of Naspers, Ton Vosloo (2004: 46-48), is of the opinion that Van Reenen contributed significantly to a “new thinking”, which resulted eventually to the capitulation of the Afrikaner apartheid government (2004: 46-48). She was from the “verligte” side of the Afrikaner establishment, and according to Vosloo, “showed the Government that its course was a false course”.

According to another peer she made many South Africans aware of a South Africa which they did not know existed (Grosskopf 1986:1). Vosloo (2004: 46) said Van Reenen

contributed immeasurably to the creation of a new order which had far-reaching consequences for our country with her exceptional reporting on a level that as yet had not been achieved in Afrikaans – nor, for that matter, in English. There was a political shift after 1965 ... that culminated in the throwing off of state-driven apartheid in 1994.

The power shift which Vosloo refers to was the establishment of a Sunday newspaper by Naspers in Johannesburg in 1965 which was independent of the National Party and which criticised apartheid from within its own ranks.

Also Giliomee (2005) describes Van Reenen’s contribution with the following description, namely of “helping the Afrikaner breathe in the choking atmosphere of the 1970s”.

One can speculate that Van Reenen was probably the only Afrikaans, maybe even South African, journalist who interviewed both Biko and Verwoerd – an indication of her independence and journalistic integrity.

Meiring argues that one can describe Van Reenen's political writing not just as criticism, but as an attack on the Nationalist regime (Meiring 2003: 8). She says:

In a time of draconian laws against the freedom of the press, in a time when the Afrikaner hegemony did not have time for the critical voice of especially Afrikaans newspapers, Rykie, in an outspoken heroic manner, called the Existing Order to real order.

It is also known that Van Reenen referred to “Afrikaners, wit en bruin” (Afrikaners, white and coloured), indicating her progressive, inclusive socio-political attitude, especially given the context of her time (Boshoff 2005: 15). Van Reenen was generally regarded as a freethinker, both in politics and religion – and as such, also as a woman (and journalist), an unusual figure in Afrikaner society.

It was as columnist, especially for the column “Op my Randakker” for *Die Beeld* and *Rapport*, that Van Reenen became a household name in the Afrikaans community. An anthology of a selection of “Randakkers” was published in 1980, which was so popular that a second print was necessary.

At *Rapport* Van Reenen was appointed as the first assistant editor of a major South African newspaper, in both Afrikaans and English. She soon also became the first woman to hold the position of acting editor during periods when the editor was absent. It is speculated by several that she could have been the first woman editor of a major title, was it not for the patriarchy of her time which withheld her from being appointed officially.

Van Reenen retired from *Rapport* in 1980 due to a debilitating illness, multiple sclerosis. After her retirement, she was still active as a sought-after book critic. She passed away three days before her 80th birthday in December 2003.

FIVE EXAMPLES OF DISSIDENT FORMULATIONS

Using five examples, this article will now present some of Van Reenen's dissentient writing to highlight her role as independent, “objective”¹ journalist in a time of a kowtowing Afrikaans media sector.

These examples of typical Van Reenen foci and formulations were selected to highlight her socio-political commentary regarding Afrikanerdom and, specifically, Afrikanerdom's subjective historiography, as stated at the beginning, a specifically male activity in a specifically hegemonic male paradigm.

Her extensive writing on censorship, both in terms of books criticising the establishment, but also on prohibitive legislation restricting reportage as applied by the Nationalist Government, are not among these examples, as this aspect of Van Reenen's work demands a study in itself. She was an outspoken critic, and her writings on censorship have become classics.

The five examples selected for this article, all from columns or book reviews, will not be analysed in detail, but will be presented (in chronological order as they appeared) to support the argument that Van Reenen was a journalist who could remain independent and "objective" despite being a member of an ethnic group within an extremely hegemonic, authoritarian period. She could transcend these boundaries and muster loyal dissent to remain a freethinker in a restrictive society.

'Now I understand a number of things better about our country'

Van Reenen could, with a few words, dissect a situation to its core, and provide readers with an analysis that would ring in their ears for days which would "become the subject of dinner table discussions" (Meiring 2003: 8). Such an example is her "Randakker" column on a biography on Voortrekker leader Andries Pretorius (Van Reenen 1977). It is said that through writing such as this she introduced Afrikaans readers to a painful past and a South Africa they did not know existed.

In this column Van Reenen refers to how Voortrekker men literally caught Zulu children during the Trek through the then Natal, to abduct as servants, and how the history she was taught never mentioned any of these painful, but important facts.

She does not spare the reader any detail: How children were caught "fervently", how each member of a commando was allowed to catch two, but how some wanted five, and how, eventually, 68 Voortrekkers signed a petition to formally request to be allowed to "catch five instead of two *klyne Zoelas*" (Dutch Afrikaans: small Zulus).

Van Reenen rubs it in: How one of these children was swapped the next day for a horse, and how the horse was sold for an "oulap" (literally, a penny, in other words, so cheap that it did not really amount to any value).

She ends this searing piece with a typical understatement: "No one taught me these things in school. Now that I have it from an impeccable source in plain Afrikaans, there are a number of things in our country that I can understand better."

'...when the cannon peeks over the hill'

Van Reenen set the political agenda in her writing with various issues. One was in 1978, in a "Randakker" column (Van Reenen 1978), as a run-up to the publication of a book that caused a sensation among Afrikaners, namely *Cottesloe* (Lückhoff

1978). At the so-called “Cottesloe meeting” in 1960 the Dutch Reformed Church, to its shame, distanced itself from decisions taken there, and thus from socio-political reform.

Van Reenen quotes Shakespeare’s Hamlet in her intro: “Rest, rest, perturbed spirit.” She proceeds by referring to the Cottesloe meeting as one spirit that does not want to go to rest. She then analyses the 1960 meeting and the 1978 publication, showing superb institutional memory and insight which became a hallmark of her work, ending the column with the following:

Of moet die geskiedenis nou maar rus? Dit sal die toppunt van wrange ironie wees as ons nog onder mekaar ’n agterhoedegeveg oor Cottesloe veg wanneer ’n kanon dalk eendag oor die bult loer.” (Or must history rather rest? It will be the pinnacle of bitter irony if we still have a rear guard fight over Cottesloe while one day a cannon peeks over the hill).²

‘Draconian fury’

Van Reenen’s review (1982a) of the book *Outcast Cape Town* (Western 1982) based on interviews by an American researcher after the Group Areas Act was implemented and families were relocated to the “waaisandwoesteny van die Vlakte” (drift sand desert of the Flats), shows Van Reenen’s sympathy and empathy with the underdog, in this case, the “internally displaced”. She is also not sparing with her criticism on the grounds of the inhumanity of the legislation.

She describes how a woman, who was relocated from Mowbray to Heideveld, went to collect her pension, and on her way wanted to have a look at the loquat tree she planted at her home in which she lived for 32 years. An English woman who then lived in what was her previous home, and on realising what the purpose of the woman’s visit was, reacted: “Shame, sy moet vir haar ’n kardoessak vol pluk.” (Shame, she should pick herself a bag full).

Van Reenen: “Krimp jy, hart?” (Do you shrink, heart?)

She adds: “The blade can also be turned!” That tale is a “tame” one, she writes, without “blood and tears”.

She continues: “One asks oneself *sotto voce* what role studies like these have played in the emphatic rejection, this past year, of this ‘cruel law’, as it was called in evidence before the Theron Commission.”

She concludes: “And if you have finished with that, you should also ask yourself how it is possible that we had to wait for an American to do such a study.”

It was with formulations in this review such as “die drakoniese drif van ’n aggressiewe Afrikaner-Nasionalisme” (the draconian fury of an aggressive Afrikaner Nationalism) that she did not endear herself to the political establishment.

The Afrikaner as ‘the bigger, freer, more humane human being he all along knew he was’

In another review (Van Reenen 1982b) she describes the book *Tyd en dae* by the unsung Afrikaner philosopher (he was Roman Catholic and taught at an English university), Marthinus Versfeld (1982), as the “most subversive little book since the four Evangelists in Afrikaans”.

She writes, “it stands in the sign of pure humanism, which cuts through all defensive mechanisms”, and which can only be seen as “subversive” of tradition by those who equate tradition with such mechanisms. Another understated Van Reenen formulation follows:

Soos die tregter na die fyndraai vorentoe vir ons nouer raak, en die uitsprake van amptelike kerk en kultuur destengevolge knellender, sê ons baie dae onder mekaar: ‘NP van Wyk Louw,³ thou shouldst be living at this hour’ (Of: ‘Hei, Schalk Pienaar,⁴ waar is jy?’) (As the funnel to the fine-turn to the future becomes narrower, and the pronouncements of official church and culture consequently more oppressive, many of us say among ourselves: ‘N.P. van Wyk Louw, thou shouldst be living at this hour.’ (Or: ‘Hey, Schalk Pienaar, where are you?’).

She then proceeds: “But don’t we overlook Versfeld?” She writes that his anthology “brings home the Afrikaner, with a sigh of the deepest gratitude” “as die ruimer, vryer, mensliker mens wat hy al die tyd geweet het hy is” (as the bigger, freer, more humane human being he all along knew he was).

She builds on the metaphor of homecoming and hospitality, and that Versfeld shows Afrikaners that they also inhabit the whole, big moral tradition of humankind, and, referring to apartheid, not only,

die benoude ou aparte eenmans-woonstelletjie met die dik diefwering voor deur en vensters nie” (the stuffy separate little one-man flat with the thick burglar bars in front of door and windows).

As if ‘through the back of binoculars’

In a review of the photographer Paul Alberts’s book, *The Borders of Apartheid* (1983), Van Reenen (1983), under the heading “Fotoboek brand gewete” (Photobook burns conscience), refers to the seed of the apartheid Bantustans,

namely how Van Riebeeck⁵ has “ewe ‘minnelijck vermaent’” (...) the “Hottentoots” to build their huts not too close to the moat of the fort, but “wat verder aff te gaen” (to go a bit further).

Van Reenen writes in her typical light and humorous style that on this, their “stoutelijk” (cheeky) answer was that Van Riebeeck and Co, as Van Riebeeck wrote in his diary, should understand,

‘dattet nie ons maar haer eijgen landt was’ en dat hulle hul ‘huisjes’ jolliewel sou bou ‘ter plaetsen daer se begeerden’ (that the land does not belong to the Dutch, but it’s theirs, and that they will build, thank you very much, wherever they please).

Then she progresses with her argument and writes insightfully how, in essence, matters of land rights are the cause of conflict in Africa. She formulates how land was estranged from the people of Africa:

grond waarvan die mense van Afrika stap vir hebsugtige stap vervreem is, totdat hulle bly sit het met ’n paar hande vol laslappies” (land that was estranged from the people of Africa step by greedy step, until they sat with only a couple of handful of patches).

The sock follows in the next formulation:

’n Mens kyk asof deur die agterkant van ’n verkyker na ’n miniatuurbeeld van die beklemmende skadusy van Westerse kolonialisme soos hy hom wêreldwyd laat geld het” (It is as if one looks through the back of binoculars to see a miniature picture of the oppressive shadow side of Western colonialism as it manifested itself worldwide).

She continues that Afrikaners were not exposed to this picture of Africa:

Ons is op ander mites grootgemaak. Daarom wens ek dié stuk was in Afrikaans geskrywe ... Dis werk soos hierdie, waarvan daar nou ál meer kom, wat die kaleidoskoop van ons geskiedenis so hartgrondig skud dat die nasionale bewussyn (kleinlettertjie-*n* van my) van ’n nuwe geslag vir goed in nuwe voeë moet val. (We were raised on other myths. That’s why I wish this was written in Afrikaans ... It is work like this, of which there is now more and more, which shakes the kaleidoscope of our history so deeply that the national consciousness (small letter *n* of mine) of a new generation once and for all must fall into new joints.

Perhaps, in hindsight, the formulation is too cautious, but one should take into account it was written during a witch hunt period in the last desperate years of apartheid in its full force, which would eliminate any dissident noise.

Towards the end of the review she leaves the reader with a question ringing in his ears, but which incorporates a statement. This is an iconic Van Reenen style-ism, and can be the subject of yet another study. In this case, she asks:

Wie moet bv. nie effens meer genuanseerd oordeel oor vandag se ANC-terreur as hy bekend is met dié organisasie se vreedsame maar vrugtelose bedinging om grondregte en politieke regte sedert 1912 nie?" (Who should not, for example, judge in a more nuanced way current ANC terror if he is familiar with the organisation's peaceful but fruitless attempts to redress property and political rights since 1912?)

DISCUSSION

These five examples show how Van Reenen could sharply analyse and criticise Afrikanerdom, but remain sympathetic to her ethnic group. This was also described as the "gentle touch" in her writing, namely that:

[p]olitically she had a very delicate touch: She may have used a bludgeon on occasion, but I always felt that she found loud voices as ineffectual as loud manners (Le May 2004:11).

She was known for her iron fist in a velvet glove, as can be seen in the next formulation:

haar humor, haar kritiese kyk en veral haar slag om die dolk met 'n laggie en 'n bietjie fluweel, maar met 'n onmiskenbare boodskap, in te dryf (her humour, her critical look and especially her way of driving in the dagger with a smile and covered with a scrap of velvet, but with an unmistakable message) (Meiring 2003: 8).

The question arises: how can a journalist, surrounded by a hegemonic ideology, practise "loyal dissent", and remain independent, a freethinker, a dissident? Can journalists distance themselves from certain contexts and be truly "objective"? Can one be "objective" and simultaneously critical, yet loyal?

The answer, if to be searched for in the work of Van Reenen, is yes. Although she was sharply, and continuously, critical of the National Party, she remained a loyal Afrikaner, even describing herself as a nationalist with a lower case n.

How did she do this? The answer lies in the fact that she managed to remain fiercely independent of a party-political ideology, and could therefore criticise

on principles, and not as a blind loyalist, as was the accusation against some of her peers. Retief Meiring (2009) says she was never a “jabroer” (yes man), but rather always on the side of the underdog.

Another observer is of the opinion that Van Reenen was “ideally situated” to influence Afrikaners with “her type of thinking”:

Rykie het ’n fyn aanvoeling gehad vir die Afrikaanse geesteswêreld – sy was vanuit die milieu, maar nooit deel daarvan nie. Sy was terselfdertyd in die binnekring en buitestander. Hierdie twee rolle het sy goed begryp en dit het haar in die posisie geplaas om vertroue te wen op grond van haar persoonlike integriteit. Vir my is dit bewys in haar onderhoud met Steve Biko en haar siening van hom. (Rykie was attuned to the Afrikaans establishment – she was of the milieu, but never part of it. She was simultaneously in the inside circle but an outsider. These two roles she understood well, and this put her in a position to win confidence on the basis of her personal integrity. To me, the evidence is in her interview with Steve Biko and her view of him) (Botha 2009).

One can also say that because of her sex, she could remain independent. No “buy-in” was necessary, as she was not part of Afrikanerdom’s male, patriarchal establishment. As a woman, this meant that she was also not a member of the Broederbond, the secret Afrikaner organisation which in fact governed South Africa in all spheres through its network of influence. Not officially an editor, she was not expected to kowtow to the Nationalist Party. Thus Van Reenen was never formally part of hegemonic group ideology, and could remain independent, observing from the outside, although being culturally, and in terms of identity and language, part of the group.

The question for us today remains: Can journalists free themselves from their own cultural backgrounds to really fulfil the role of watchdogs and be independent, “objective”?

CONCLUSION

One can conclude that, given the example of Van Reenen, a journalist can be, and must be, independent and “objective” from hegemonic thinking and remain true to principles in searching for the “truth”.

She herself referred in an interview (Voigt 1995) to how a journalist could encounter a problem with “afstandelikeid” (distancing) and independence. As a fellow-Afrikaner she often had to write about people she knew in their personal capacity, and the matter of loyalty was a reality. She then proceeded to say they

were exactly that: people – but how then to write about the disgraces and scandals in which they found themselves? Van Reenen said that “in that respect” you develop a “steely” will, namely not to do something for the sake of exposing them, but to be “loyal to the truth”. In her words: “You develop a primary loyalty to the truth ... That is also the wonderful thing about journalism. That admission to yourself that the truth is important to you.”

Taking into account that Van Reenen was critical of the government of the day, yet still remained an Afrikaner nationalist, with a lower case n, as she referred to her herself, journalists can indeed learn from the past and apply those insights to the present.

Although Van Reenen was in her gut an Afrikaner, she could be a freethinker and practise loyal dissent by focusing on issues and principles in her search for the truth, and not be blinded by loyalism. This is a lesson from the past that today’s journalists can and should heed. Our country is (still) in need of independent, critical, “objective” journalists, yet journalists who can remain loyal to values, and can criticise on principle.

Indeed, today’s South African journalists have an inspiring example in Van Reenen. If a journalist who worked during the heyday of apartheid South Africa, and for a company whose *raison d’être* was to support the specific ethnic nationalism of the government of the day, could be successful in such a practise, today’s journalists should follow her example.

This can also be applied to the fact that journalism, as “first draft of history”, can serve a formal purpose in recording history, and thereby, as a branch of historiography, can (and should) have its own historical substance, and not only serve to record “social, political, economic and cultural events”.

In terms of a gender argument, and the masculinity of historiography as discussed earlier, one can also conclude that Van Reenen has proved that she was faithful to principles, and a reliable recorder of history. The past, indeed, is present, and lessons can be learnt from a freethinker journalist who adhered to the principles of journalism by practising loyal dissent.

Endnotes

- ¹ It should be noted that “objectivity” is a contested notion in journalism. “Objectivity” is defined as “not influenced by personal feeling or opinions in considering and representing facts” (Nel, 2001:53). However, “[a]ll facts reported to newspaper readers must pass through the mind of the reporter. Every reporter observes events and understands facts against a screen of experience and through the film of human emotions” (Leiter, Harriss & Johnson, 2000:227). Early newspapers and magazines were, in fact, propaganda, and reflected “the ideologies of a particular political party, or the opinions and aspirations of the single owner” (Nel, 2001:53). One can state

that in the case of the majority of Afrikaans media this is particularly true, as it was the task of the Afrikaans media to propagate Afrikaner-Nationalism. Nel writes that objectivity has only been a discussion point since the early 20th century (2001:53). Although there can be conscious efforts to be “objective”, “[t]he complete objectivity necessary to perfect reporting has yet to be achieved by any reporter” (Leiter *et al.*, 2000:227). “Few readers, but all editors, know that the process of gathering and writing news is subjective, despite all efforts to make it objective” (Leiter *et al.*, 2000:226). Westerstahl divides objectivity into “factualness” and “impartiality”. The first is further divided into “truth” and “relevance”, and the latter into “balance” and “neutrality” (as cited in Nel, 2001:53). The term “objectivity” will thus be used in quotation marks throughout this article to indicate its ambivalence and, in fact, impossibilism.

- ² As a note to this example, it must be said that these words still echo in the new South Africa and proved to be prophetic, namely that Afrikaners still have a rear-guard fight while danger is lurking ahead. The same words, namely, can be applied to a recent incident in which an Afrikaner philosopher was literally attacked by a fellow (right wing) Afrikaner (Gerber 2011: 1) for his views – in a time when South Africa’s real dangers should be identified and focused on in order to seek solutions for the “cannon peeking over the hill”.
- ³ N.P. van Wyk Louw, a well-known “liberal” Afrikaans poet and academic of his time who developed the concept “loyal dissent”.
- ⁴ Schalk Pienaar was regarded as a “liberal” Afrikaans journalist and editor.
- ⁵ Jan van Riebeeck, the founder of the VOC’s refreshment station at the Cape which led to the colonisation of the Cape, first by the Dutch, and then by the British.

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