Commentary

On Shaping South African Society: Whistleblowing as a Forerunner

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The De-centre: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies offers a commentary section, with a call for this section having the slogan: "A space for critical commentary on issues shaping societies' present and future". When I received this call, the slogan elicited particular interest for me, and it is with this slogan that I considered my own research – that is, the impact that the phenomenon of whistleblowing has on shaping society.

I understand whistleblowing as a social phenomenon that occurs when an insider discloses a wrongdoing to an authority that they believe would be able to remedy that wrongdoing, and this understanding is largely informed by Janet Near and Marcia Miceli's (1985) seminal work. It is widely accepted that United States lawyer, journalist and civil activist Ralph Nader employed, in 1971, the "first formal use of the term "whistleblower" to denote insiders who expose organizational wrongdoing" (Uys, 2022: 26). Nader, in fact, put the term to use in order to avoid common derogatory vocabulary such as 'snitch' and 'informer'. Yet, the history of 'blowing the whistle' dates back to well before that. In South Africa, Adam Tas and Emily Hobhouse can be considered two early whistleblowers.

Adam Tas was a Free Burgher, an independent farmer released from Dutch East India Company (VOC) service and granted citizen rights, who had blown the whistle on corruption perpetrated by local VOC officials at the Cape of Good Hope. The corruption, and essentially despotism, was the product of Willem Adriaan van der Stel. Willem Adriaan van der Stel was the son of Simon van der Stel (the first Governor of the Cape Dutch Colony). Willem Adriaan van der Stel, who served as the second Governor of the Cape Dutch Colony, built a corrupt trading monopoly and impeded on the Free Burghers' ability to earn a living. These activities were well documented, from circa mid-1705 to early-1706, in what would become known as The Diary of Adam Tas (Fouché, 1914). Tas, with other Free Burghers, signed a petition detailing the nefarious affairs of van der Stel and local VOC officials. The petition was sent to the VOC headquarters in Amsterdam, where it would eventually be rejected. Van der Stel, becoming aware of the existence of the petition, would imprison Tas in the 'Black Hole', a windowless dungeon in the Castle of Good Hope. Only after 13 months would Tas be released and van der Stel ordered to return to the Netherlands (as a consequence of the details in the Tas petition).

There have, of course, been those that have argued in favour of van der Stel, like British journalist and historian Ian Colvin (1909: 142) who claimed that van der Stel "ruled wisely and kindly, and that his fall was due to a wicked conspiracy bolstered up by charges which were, one and all of them, entirely and absolutely false". Nevertheless, Tas was imprisoned under inhumane conditions for blowing the whistle on what he perceived to constitute wrongdoing. Now, Tas, was by no means a hero – he worked in pursuit of his own goals, used slaves as a means to reap the harvest, and referred to slaves as a commodity throughout his accounts. Tas' petition, itself, was mired in racism with the signatories of the petition having "expressed their fear and loathing of their coloured compatriots in vivid terms" (Newton-King, 2007: 43). Yet, Tas' disclosure did contribute to the shaping of South African society. Van der Stel would, as a consequence of the conflict between himself and the Free Burghers, scornfully refer to his adversaries as 'Boeren' or 'Boers', ultimately "this scornful appellation denotes no caste or class: it designates a nation" (Fouché, 1914: 363). Tas' disclosure and the ensuing conflict fed into longer-running processes that contributed to the Boers as an emergent people rather than a social class lower than that of the Cape Dutch. The disclosure also had immediate broader reaching consequences, with the recall of van der Stel to Amsterdam in 1708 enabling the Trekboers (nomadic livestock farmers who had moved northwards of the Cape – essentially early Boers) to finally move eastwards, which was not possible before since van der Stel had occupied land in that direction (Buys, 2024).

Emily Hobhouse's disclosure was just as important for the shaping of South African society. Hobhouse was a British pacifist and anti-war campaigner. She arrived in South Africa in the midst of the Second Boer War (1899-1902), which was a conflict between the British Empire and two independent Boer republics. The war was officially framed as a governance dispute but was, in actual fact, driven by British imperial ambition. Soon after her arrival, she learned of concentration camps where Boer women and children were being kept, which she then gained access to despite British censorship regarding the camps. Hobhouse effectively became an insider when she gained access to the horrors of these camps. The conditions within the camps were appalling, with overcrowding and lack of sanitation resulting in the deaths of many. Hobhouse would record her findings in a 40-page report, which was supported by testimony from women in these camps. The findings were delivered to the British Secretary of State for War, prior to being published. It was at this point that Hobhouse began enacting the role of a whistleblower. Hobhouse was, subsequently, branded a traitor in Britain (Osborne, 2025). British denialism was in full effect, with pro-British proponents of the war having argued that the treatment of the children in the camps had been weaponised. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the very same Conan Doyle that created Sherlock Holmes, had written a letter to the editor of The Daily Chronicle in response to Hobhouse's findings regarding the concentration camps, which was published on 1 February

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1902. The letter concerned a photo of an emaciated seven-year-old Boer child, Elizabeth Cecilia van Zyl, who died from typhoid fever, with Conan Doyle arguing that the child "was the victim of her own mother, rather than of the British authorities" (Doyle, 1902: 3). Despite the denialism, Hobhouse's disclosure had exposed the crimes of the British Empire to the world (with the Fawcett Commission confirming, in 1901, appalling camp conditions for both Boer and black African inmates) and her actions left a permanent imprint on South Africa, setting precedent for activism. In a bizarre twist under apartheid rule, the South African Navy launched a submarine – the SAS Emily Hobhouse – unfittingly named after the eponymous pacifist.

It must be emphasized that this commentary is not a history piece but is rather concerned with a phenomenon that shapes "societies' present and future", as De-centre puts it. However, we need to learn from the past to shape our future. Tas and Hobhouse's disclosures are powerful examples of how whistleblowing has contributed to the shaping of South African society.

Recently, Mcebisi Jonas, Vytjie Mentor, Themba Maseko, Simphiwe Mayisela, Cynthia Stimpel, Mosilo Mothepu, Bianca Goodson, the Gupta Leaks whistleblowers, and many others were instrumental in exposing South Africa's state of capture. Their disclosures would cumulatively detail the intricacies of state capture under Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018), exposing an iniquitous entanglement of private and public interests. State-owned enterprises were looted and government contracts were manipulated all for the private benefit of a select few (Radulovic, 2023b). The many whistleblowers that brought these revelations to the fore were not rewarded for doing so, but were rather retaliated against. They experienced work-related retaliation, social retaliation, legal retaliation, and lived in constant fear of physical retaliation (Radulovic, 2023a). Thus, despite their disclosures changing the socio-political trajectory of the country, these state capture whistleblowers have endured (and, in some cases, continue to endure) an anguish akin to that of earlier whistleblowers. Their disclosures have generally come at a great personal cost, yet their disclosures have shaped South Africa's past and present, and will continue to shape its future. To conclude, the act of whistleblowing has been, and continues to be, a forerunner (or at least a major contributing factor) that shapes South African society.

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About the Author

Dr Ugljesa Radulovic is a Senior Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Johannesburg's Department of Sociology. He has lectured at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He has dedicated his research to the intricacies of group dynamics, ethics, and the critical role of whistleblowing, which is reflected in his publication portfolio.