

Media–state relations in emerging democracies

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Media-State Relations in Emerging Democracies.

Adrian Hadland

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Reviewed by Lada Trifonova Price

The book is an important contribution to the ongoing scholarly efforts in building a comparative systematic framework of inquiry into media-politics-state relationships in emerging democracies – namely one that lives up to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal models for established democracies. The central proposition – that institutional and criminal corruption lies at the heart of establishment power – will resonate strongly with citizens from the so-called “third wave” democracies. Hadland captures the optimism and disappointment that comes with dramatic changes in politics and society. Like Hadland, many of us who lived through a painful transition found out quickly enough that the road to democracy was neither straight, nor smooth. He argues that over the past quarter of a century several regions in the world, from Eastern Europe and Asia to Latin America and Africa, have found themselves subject to a particularly harmful state influence that inevitably extends to all institutions and spheres in society and the media.

The book's focus is on South Africa and China's individual struggles of democratisation, although Hadland places both countries in the context of other nations elsewhere in the world that are undergoing similar transformation. While both countries offer fertile ground for comparison, Hadland relies on his research to demonstrate his theory of the “Acquisitive State”. The Acquisitive State, argues Hadland, is a new pattern that has emerged in most third-wave democracies that has seen the gradual rise of state power and consequent interference with the democratic process and the press. Hadland notes this gradual decline in South Africa but, more importantly, asks the crucial question that all nations in transitions are grappling with: what happened? The new political breakthrough allowed a brief but exciting “honeymoon”, during which the press and government seem to get on well, sharing a common purpose of serving the public. He describes it as “a figurative rollercoaster of emotions, fears and expectations”. Soon the hopes, euphoria and liberation of citizens are crushed by the authorities regaining control of their countries by repressive practices, including pressure on the media through numerous and sophisticated legal, political and financial mechanisms and attacks on hard-won journalistic freedom and independence. The media in emerging democracies seems to be no longer a catalyst for change but a tool used to fulfil political and other personal agendas. The focus of the book is precisely in the conflict that arises when the press is trying to free itself from the control of those with political power or the Acquisitive State.

The main strength of this book is Hadland's background, as a professional journalist turned researcher. He has extensive first-hand reporting experience of South African political life during the period of transition from apartheid dictatorship to democracy, including reporting from Pretoria, the former bastion of the white apartheid Republic. The book is methodologically sound – the fruit of years of academic research. It is a pleasure to read mainly because Hadland is a skilled writer who effortlessly blends journalistic flair with academic rigour. His direct contact with key state and non-state

actors in South Africa, including former president Mandela, adds a fascinating personal touch to his argument. In his capacity as a researcher, advising the South African government, he has wandered the corridors of power and appears acutely aware of the intricacies of state bureaucratic apparatus. This has ultimately given him an invaluable insight into the workings of state institutions and their armies of officials. Hadland's significant first-hand experience as a witness to and participant in the changes taking place in South Africa's media and political landscape are arguably also a disadvantage, adding a slight bias to his writing. Hadland does not hide his suspicion of the state and, more specifically, state power. This is strongly linked to his belief that power has the potential to corrupt all democratically elected officials, never mind those in authoritarian societies like China, where the state has eagerly embraced capitalism at the expense of a "neutered, nationalist population".

In his case studies Hadland shows that despite profound differences, what unites South Africa and China is the behaviour of their political leadership and elites: both have taken advantage of new market opportunities for personal gain and enrichment. Many, such as the former president Thabo Mbeki, became embroiled in corruption scandals and have been accused of dishonest practices. When held accountable, those who embody the state declare war on the press by rewarding those that are supportive and punishing critical publications and journalists.

What of the novel notion of the Acquisitive State? Born out of two sets of insecurities – political/global and financial/systemic – Hadland argues that the key features of the acquisitive state in emerging democracies consist of invasiveness and concentration of power, destructive nationalism, an adaptive nature and the ability to hide behind the facade of superficial reforms or perpetual state of crisis. This state serves the needs of corruptible elites deeply rooted in repressive regimes, a dimension with profound negative consequences to democratisation. As well as casting a fresh eye on key theories of the nation-state and its development during the 21st century, Hadland gives us a new analytical and systematic approach to studying the crucial role of the state in the development of media systems in emerging democracies. So far scholars have explored the contested media-state relationship by focusing on three main versions of state intervention in the media: the triple roles of the state as owner, regulator and financier of the media, public and private. By "unapologetically" shining the spotlight on the global South the book broadens the perspective and illuminates a range of media-state dynamics that cannot be found in the context of single-country studies. Despite its claim to make a "modest" contribution to the field of media studies in emerging democracies Hadland's work will no doubt be useful for scholars in a variety of disciplines concerned with the current debates on globalisation and democratisation.

Sadly, Hadland's theory has already been proven true for many fragile and established democracies alike; while the state is getting stronger the media is weakening under severe pressure from legitimate and illegitimate actors, digital technology, rise of PR, and increasing commercialisation, to name just a few. Nowhere is the dire situation with press freedom more visible than in the annual Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index that highlights the vicious intensity of attacks on journalistic freedoms worldwide. The question that I was left with at the end of this timely book and perhaps readers will ask themselves too is: what are we going to do about it?

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