

Obituary

Professor Belinda Bozzoli –

A paradigm changer of her time in South Africa

* 17 Dec 1945 † 5 Dec 2020

Close to publication time of the Dec 2020 issue of the *New Contree* Journal, I received the shocking news in an email about Professor Belinda's passing. It was hardly possible to engage in a more substantial reflection on this prolific academic interdisciplinary driven intellectual, leader and politician. Though I never had the opportunity to meet with Prof Bozzoli in person, sadly I may say, I always admired her academic work as an A-rated sociologist. My admiring in particular was for Bozzoli's scholarly associations with especially the Wits History Workshop,



which intrigued me and richly informed me on my interests in specifically regional histories that relate to social history and the lives of ordinary people.

It's heartening to hear from her students (like Prof Catherine Burns)¹ and from her close colleagues (like Sociologist, Prof Johnathan Hyslop)² on Prof Belinda as person.³ For Catherine Prof Belinda's thoughts of social history, and for Jonathan the specifics of a lived experience of the working class through Bozzoli's thoughts, will live on in time. To be remembered, debated and continuously considered in the South African historiography, amongst others, will indeed be Prof Bozzoli's social consciousness and the "philosophical disposition of working class women"⁴ in South Africa. For others she was a "feminist crusader".⁵ From Hyslop's encounter its clear to see that her studies in the United Kingdom, and being exposed to several radical political movements, as well as her contact with the Oxford-based History Workshop, very much shaped her thoughts in the 1960's and 1970's as an

1 Burns is an associate professor of medical history at the University of the Witwatersrand.

2 Prof Hyslop is a professor of Sociology and a scholar in African studies at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York. He is also an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria.

3 Both Catherine Burns and Jonathan Hyslop wrote obituaries on Prof Belinda in Businesslive on 10 Dec 2020. See <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-an-academic-rooted-in-the-lived-experience-of-the-working-class/>, and <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-a-brave-and-beautiful-life-that-had-ripples-far-beyond-sa/>.

4 See C Burns, "Belinda Bozzoli: A brave and beautiful life that had ripples far beyond SA" as in <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-a-brave-and-beautiful-life-that-had-ripples-far-beyond-sa/>, 10 Dec 2020.

5 "Belinda Bozzoli the racist sociology Professor is no more", <https://za.opera.news/za/en/politics/8ccbe87090115a2ad889bb5e44a815d0>, no date.

intellectual doyen in South Africa. She and her husband, the well-known historian and prolific writer Charles van Onselen, together with many others, established the Wits History Workshop which is still a successfully ongoing research group.⁶

Hyslop captures Bozzoli's paradigm change philosophy for South Africa's history as: "Culture and politics, rather than economics in a narrow sense, and the lives of ordinary people, stood at the centre of her vision. She stressed the need to understand the point of view of 'factory workers, domestic servants, traders, diggers, the unemployed'" ⁷ Burns adds on her memory of Belinda Bozzoli's gigantic scholarly legacy:⁸

A tribute to her life would not be complete without noting her pugnacious humour; her sparkling, compelling and even terrifying eyes ... A theorist; a teacher of thousands; as supervisor of dissertations by trade unionists; politicians; bankers; artists; nuns; teachers; musicians; civil servants; leaders of NGOs; global activists; actors; writers and journalists and more...

The National Research Foundation's voice on Prof Belinda's legacy can be added:⁹

... In addition to publishing 26 articles, Prof Bozzoli authored three single-author books, including, among others, *Women of Phokeng* and *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*. She also edited/co-edited four other books. She held a number of Fellowships during her career including an Associate Fellowship at Yale University from 1978 to 1979; the Oppenheim Visiting Fellowship at Oxford; and Fellowships at Cambridge University and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in France. She received a number of accolades for her work including Top Researcher Award from the Human Sciences Research Council and a nomination for the Herskovits Award from the African Studies Association.

It's an academic life, one of profounding thought, and consequently leading to paradigm shifts, that one cannot but humbly salute.

(Compiled by Elize S van Eeden)

6 See the Hyslop obituary as in <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-an-academic-rooted-in-the-lived-experience-of-the-working-class/>.

7 Jonathan Hyslop, "Belinda Bozzoli, an academic rooted in the lived experience of the working class", as in <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-an-academic-rooted-in-the-lived-experience-of-the-working-class/>, 10 Dec 2020.

8 C Burns, "Belinda Bozzoli: A brave and beautiful life..." as in <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2020-12-10-belinda-bozzoli-a-brave-and-beautiful-life-that-had-ripples-far-beyond-sa/>, 10 Dec 2020.

9 NRF, "Obituary: Professor Belinda Bozzoli", <https://www.nrf.ac.za/media-room/news/obituary-professor-belinda-bozzoli>, 7 Dec 2020.