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The Invention of Free Press

Writers and Censorship in Eighteenth
Century Europe

 Springer

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Preface

This book had its origin at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in 2006. Its Italian version, which was published with Carocci in 2011, took shape during my stay there as a member, thanks to the kind invitation from the School of Historical Studies and Jonathan Israel in particular: for 6 months he was a constant source of intellectual stimulus and support. I reworked the text and turned it into English during my time as a Fulbright Distinguished Lecturer at Northwestern University, Evanston, in 2011. For their warm hospitality I am deeply grateful to Regina Schwarz, Bill Davis and Edward Muir. Melissa Wittmeier, Fergus Robson and Martin Thom have been immensely helpful at different stages of the re-writing process, which took longer than originally anticipated and was achieved in 2014.

During troubled times I owe to M., A., D. more than words can ever express.

Torino, May 2015

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
BnF, MS fr.	Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Manuscrits français
DBI	<i>Dizionario biografico degli italiani</i> . Roma: Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani 1960–2012
HJ	The Historical Journal
JMH	Journal of Modern History
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Languages Association
RSI	Rivista Storica Italiana
SVEC	Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century

Introduction

Internalist Censorship, Externalist Censorship

One of the most powerful and imaginative metaphors used to describe the development of modern European history is Max Weber's "iron cage". By "iron cage" we understand the process of rational bureaucratisation that takes possession of all forms of life to be inevitable. According to Max Weber, humankind will end up living a life of "congealed spirit" in a thoroughly rationalized capitalist world. Ironically, we are now aware that this metaphor was not really Max Weber's, but rather Talcott Parsons's creation; and that what Weber called the "stahlhartes Gehäuse" should be translated into English as "a shell as hard as steel". This expression refers to the deeply penetrating process of metamorphosis that transforms man in the era of rational modernity. The contrasting implications are clear: it is perhaps possible to break out of a cage, but it is much more difficult to shed a carapace that adheres to our bodies and dictates all our movements, affecting eventually even our thoughts.¹ A detailed analysis of Max Weber's historical sociology, especially in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is not directly relevant to a history of censorship institutions, but the main thrust of his argument is, given the crucial role of censorship in constraining the spiritual and intellectual development of Europeans in the early modern period.²

My research on censorship in the eighteenth century is in fact intended to illustrate the general idea that early modern European history can profitably be described in terms of the building up of a variety of systems of control, and likewise in terms of the legitimizing or questioning of their scope, range and efficacy. In Weberian terms, therefore, at a certain point along this development it seemed possible, desirable and even necessary that "a shell as hard as steel" be created and adjusted to the inner life of men and women, encompassing all possible forms of written communication and rendering the oral transmission of thoughts, ideas, and emotions a

¹ Ghosh 1994; Baehr 2002; Ghosh 2008.

² Weber 2011.

sometimes dangerous enterprise. In pursuing this control of written and oral expression, European institutions, secular and ecclesiastical, were inspired by the precedents of the Greek and Latin cultures, where freedom of expression was a serious issue albeit under very different technical conditions.

This book does not claim that Europe has yet another hidden secret to be ashamed of. As a matter of fact, the opposite might well be true. It might indeed be argued that exerting control over the communication of thoughts and observations was not what was new and historically significant, but rather that despite the indeed high levels of physical and symbolic violence inherent in the everyday life of early modern European society, control was challenged by authors, printers, and in many cases members of the governing elites themselves. Those involved strove to achieve a balance between authority and individualism that placed more weight on the latter. As a result, forms of control, and especially pre-publication agencies, were forced to compromise and meet the needs of civil society, instead of disrupting it through recurrent outbursts of violence and haphazard repression. The Greek literary canon that became popular among the educated elites after Humanism featured both the poles: violent repression and consensual limitation of the boundaries of the freedom of speech. The example of Ulysses ostentatiously beating Thersites in the midst of an assembly set a paradigm that framed the early modern approach to the question of freedom of expression: the principle that freedom of speech must be coupled with a sense of respect for authority was widely accepted. The contrast between “Men [who] sat calmly in their places” and “a single man [who] kept on yelling out abuse – scurrilous Thersites, expert in various insults, vulgar terms for inappropriate attacks on kings” has remained as a constant point of reference enabling us to visualize the conduct of those who abused their freedom to speak. Freedom of speech did not mean being at liberty to say anything whatsoever in any and every place.³

Some centuries after the Homeric poem, the historian Thucydides provided a sophisticated example of the workings of freedom of speech within the framework of political freedom. When it became associated with democratic government in fifth-century Athens, freedom of speech was granted to Athenian citizens as a component of newly won political freedoms, but it did not include the right to slander individuals or to repudiate the gods of the city, as Socrates discovered to his cost. The most telling example of this understanding of freedom of speech was the oration Thucydides wrote for Cleon and Diodotus. Here frankness was acceptable because their mutual trust limited the import of their potential dissension, both citizens being committed to furthering the best interests of the Athenian republic and having pledged neither to slander their opponent nor to cast doubts on his loyalty.⁴

George Bernard Shaw may have been right when he affirmed that assassination is the extreme form of censorship. If so, then it is remarkable that as a way to deal with opponents, murder was delegitimized and the right to preserve one’s life came to be central to Enlightenment thought; censorship and pre-publication censorship in particular must be seen, ironically, as a phase of what Norbert Elias called the

³Homer 1924.

⁴Thucydides 1920. *Book 3*.

Process of Civilization.⁵ The practice of censorship might be viewed as a particular form of limited toleration compared to the brutal repression of dissenting voices: nonetheless, an increasing uneasiness with the principle of pre-publication censorship emerged in the eighteenth century and paved the way for a revision of the notion of both control and freedom of the press.

Censorship is elusive in a peculiar fashion. As it is concerned with the suppression or transformation of ideas, expressed in discourses, either written or spoken, in paintings and pictures, and in various forms of conduct, censorship as we now understand it can encompass virtually all possible manifestations of human life in a society upon which some form of power, direct and indirect, can be exercised. It has been rightly argued by David McKitterick that “visual but non-verbal texts, as well as oral ones” were important in the predominantly non-literate or pre-literate society of early modern Europe.⁶ David Freeberg, for his part, has suggested that censorship in the widest sense of the term was strict when applied to etchings and engravings: it was figurative culture that disseminated the most inappropriate thoughts of social as well sexual emancipation from hierarchical control.⁷ Any statement can be censored, at least theoretically, and a positive doctrine of the boundaries of the permissible is unthinkable.⁸ The temptation for the historian to investigate all possible forms of censorship is great: it is advisable to resist this temptation, however, and to focus on the historicity of censorship, on aspects that reflect the specificity of an epoch, of a milieu, of a constellation of world outlooks and, whenever the sources allow us to do so, of individual choices and activities.

It is hardly debatable that in the history of European culture, printed material brought a crucial change that in the long run fundamentally shaped how Europeans thought of politics, religion and culture in general.⁹ The invention of the printing press with moveable type prompted a general awareness that systematic control of communication was becoming necessary and that governments had to devise agencies charged primarily with this task: not only the many *Indices librorum prohibitorum* and the Holy Office set up by the Popes of the Counter-Reformation, but the whole array of power centres established during the age of religious warfare from the 1550s onwards bear witness to this. It seems fair to say that by the late seventeenth century a system of control was established throughout most of continental Europe with similar features and that thenceforth it was gradually delegitimized, adjusted and eventually rendered ineffective until the French Revolution elaborated a new approach, which it, in turn, disseminated throughout Europe. One of the definitive consequences of this revolutionary upheaval was the exclusion of religious institutions from the censorship apparatus. In the post-Napoleonic era, the confronta-

⁵Elias 1939; Elias 1982.

⁶McKitterick 2003: 39.

⁷Freeberg 1989. Chapter Senses and censorship: 345–77.

⁸Benrekassa 1980. Chapter *Savoir politique et connaissance historique à l’aube des lumières*: 31–52.

⁹Despite their obvious shortcomings two books are still relevant in this context: Eisenstein 1979 and Ong 1982.

tion between the censorship machinery, now exclusively state-run, and public opinion took centre stage as an integral aspect of nineteenth-century politics.¹⁰

In fact, developments in both state structure and political thinking during the late eighteenth century and the Napoleonic era substantially remodelled the pattern and forms of control in all of Europe, so much so, indeed, that its previous incarnations were rendered all but incomprehensible. A satirical poster from the final decades of the nineteenth century shows the head-on confrontation that became typical of the modern and liberal understanding of censorship.¹¹ A rally is led by a mole, the head of a censor is a pair of scissors, little children follow. The comment goes: “Süsse heilige Censur, / Lass uns gehn auf deiner Spur; / Leite uns an deiner Hand / Kindern gleich, am Gängelband!”¹² (Sweet saint censorship, / Let’s follow your footprints;/ Take us by the hand/ Like small children, /Keep us in leading-strings!).

Censorship had indeed become central to political struggle in the nineteenth century, concerned as it was with the question of who controls what, as well as with the public debate that dealt with the question of why we have to accept that somebody controls somebody else at all. The liberal movement focused on protecting the press from any encroachments and elevated the principle of freedom of the press to a principle embedded in the constitutional charters. The sensitivity of liberal culture in the West has had a twofold and strikingly divergent outcome as to the function and meaning attributed to censorship that had and still has an impact on historians’ understanding of its role and relevance. It is, therefore, necessary to look just for a moment beyond the boundaries set by the gatekeepers of the historical profession. The meaning of censorship as a notion has widened to an unprecedented degree. In fact, it has got out of control. The main reason for this expansion of the discursive field around censorship is in all likelihood to be found in the Freudian emphasis upon its role. Indeed, Freud gave censorship a central function in his psychoanalytical research.

Censorship is a key function of conscious life in that it diverts excessive stimuli, unacceptable thoughts, to the unconscious, where they reemerge as distorted manifestations of the psychic life. The political analogy was clear to Freud. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where Freud presented a full-fledged version of his censorship theory, the dream-thought has to tackle in the psyche of the dreamer the same problem as “the political writer who has disagreeable truths to tell those in authority”. Freud presents censorship as a necessary feature of society. His description of the impact of censorship on the writer is realistic. “If he presents [truth] undisguised, the authorities will suppress his words – after they have been spoken, if this pronouncement was an oral one, but beforehand, if he had intended to make it in print. A writer must be aware of censorship, and to account for it he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion. According to the strength and sensitiveness of the censorship he finds himself compelled either merely to refrain from certain forms of attack, or to speak in allusions instead of direct references, or he

¹⁰ *The Power of the Pen* 2010.

¹¹ *Censorship and Silencing* 1998.

¹² *Der Zensur zum Trotz* 1991: 28; Clemens 2013.

must conceal his objectionable pronouncement beneath some apparently innocent disguise: for instance, he may describe a dispute between two mandarins in the Middle Kingdom, when the people he has in mind are officials in his own country. The stricter the censorship, the more far-reaching the disguise and the more ingenious too may be the means employed to alert the reader to the true meaning".¹³ Freud did not envisage a society without controlling agencies: the people and the ruler must be as juxtaposed as the two contending psychic forces at work in the production of dreams; political censorship and dream-distortion are similarly determined. "One of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish and by the use of censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish".¹⁴ The practice of censorship provided the model that inspired his description of the structural filtering out of intolerable wishes.¹⁵ In Freud's day, pre-publication censorship had been abolished in Austria as a consequence of the political reforms of 1862, but the memory of its working from 1851 to 1862 and the ruthless Russian censorship provided examples of real and successful censorship.¹⁶ Besides, in the political crisis of 1897 the censor had confiscated two issues of the liberal daily newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* and proved to be a political factor in the building of public opinion.¹⁷ Far from suppressing the life of the emotions and the intellect, censorship, in Freud's theory, acts as a balancing factor that allows wishes to be expressed without disrupting the personality. Censorship promotes an adaptive strategy and capabilities that make political and cultural life possible and productive.

This crucial role has been further expanded in Lacan's influential writings: to him censorship is constitutive of meaning and subjectivity itself, and the access to meaning and subjectivity becomes possible only through the practice of self-censorship. This broadening of the meaning and role of censorship has had an impact on the sociology of knowledge.¹⁸ Bourdieu's notion of censorship is based on an interest in linguistics rather than in psychoanalysis, but he reaches a similar conclusion to Freud as to the pervasiveness of censorship, in its regulation of the field where both form and content are expressed. According to Bourdieu, censorship is perfect when it is invisible, as it is inherent in all forms of perception and expression that make the circulation of discourses within a specific field possible. In reality, structural censorship is total and omnipresent self-censorship. The censor

¹³ Freud 1953. Vol. 4: 142.

¹⁴ Freud 1953. Vol. 4: 143.

¹⁵ See Schorske 1980: 187–8.

¹⁶ "Deliria are the work of a censorship which no longer takes the trouble to conceal its operation; instead of collaborating in producing a new version that shall be unobjectionable, it ruthlessly deletes whatever it disapproves of, so that what remains becomes quite disconnected. This censorship acts exactly like the censorship of newspapers at the Russian frontier, which allows foreign journals to fall into the hands of the readers whom it is its business to protect only after a quantity of passages have been blacked out" (Freud 1953. Vol. 5: 529). On censorship in nineteenth century Austria see Bachleitner 1997; Olechowski 2004.

¹⁷ McGrath 1986: 249.

¹⁸ Lacan 1977. See Mellard 1998.

dissolves in the mechanisms of power and in the formulation of the expression.¹⁹ Like Lacan and Bourdieu, Foucault has frequently employed the concept of censorship while transforming its meaning. For Foucault, censorship expresses itself most perfectly, not negatively, in explicit prohibition, but positively in the formulation of discourses through which power, dispersed across the whole of the society, is practised. This holds true even for societies where complete freedom of thought is proclaimed. What was initially achieved through the occasional suppression of speech acts can be more thoroughly achieved through a “technology of power” that incorporates the production of discourse and knowledge.²⁰ The impact of this reorientation of the idea of censorship has been notable among certain schools of historians. The “New Censorship” theorists stress that censorship is pervasive and unavoidable. For them, the very notion of a sociopolitical context fades into the background, while the production of texts is emphasized, irrespective of the intentions of the individuals involved in their elaboration and of the actual workings of formalized institutions of control.²¹ In consequence, the author’s original intention and intended meaning no longer constituted the central topic of analysis. As a matter of fact, the notion of original authorial intention, at the core of any philological approach to the facts of the past, appears, in this light, to be irrelevant. The notion of a damaging censorship, interfering with the creative act of an author, is integral to the idea of the emergence of the canon and the collective development of accepted paradigms. This can be called an internalist approach as it highlights the structural features of the censorship systems while rendering the actual confrontation between individuals less relevant (not all authors were glad to be included in a canon they did not want to have any part in) and better delineating the links between censorship and other forms of coercion. According to Richard Dutton, the Master of the Revels was a friend as much as a master to the licensed actors of Tudor England.²² Annabel Patterson has defined “censorship as a code, as a tacit contract between writers and the authorities”,²³ and stressed that it was largely unwritten and unpredictable, based as it was on the ability of both parties, power and writers, to guess where the limit of the unspeakable was, and avoid the “equivocations shared by authors and authorities”.²⁴ Contemporary to Ben Jonson, in the early seventeenth century “the critic and the censor were complicit rather than opposed: censors operated as critics, and critics legitimated particular kinds of censorship”.²⁵ Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* has recently been singled out as a metaphor of “how openness, freedom from obligation, and textual originality remain inseparable from the forms of censorship, regulation and restraint that in fact produce them. The borders between

¹⁹ Bourdieu 1982. Bourdieu’s theory has inspired Biermann 1988.

²⁰ Foucault 1976.

²¹ Müller 2004. A similar point is made in Rosenfeld 2001: 129. For a juridical approach see Schauer 1998.

²² Dutton 1991.

²³ Patterson 1984: 63.

²⁴ Patterson 1984: 74–5.

²⁵ Burt 1993: 30.

freedom and prohibition, knowledge and censorship, inside and outside, are radically unstable within the space and vision of the institution, collapsing these opposed oppositions into more complex and indeterminate formations, characterized by, for example, the non-self-identical doubleness, the uncanny twinning, of Europe-Bensalem”.²⁶ When the application of the internalist approach is extended beyond the analysis of individual texts, and into the network created by their reception in different cultures, translation can be equated to censorship because “both censorship and translation are strategies to control meaning that are unavoidably insufficient”. “To be for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship *is*. One can only discriminate among its more and less repressive effects”.²⁷

Parallel to these developments in debates about the issue of freedom of the press and censorship, political and cultural events of the twentieth century tell a different story: censorship is associated with oppressive governments as distinct from liberal or democratic governments, freedom of speech and the press are portrayed as desirable and attainable ends, and European history is narrated as a progression from censorship towards unimpeded self-expression.²⁸ Overviews of the history of newspapers are especially prone to adhere to a master narrative that emphasizes the liberating power of the market over state intervention. Censorship is considered to be a powerful but inherently transient hindrance on the way to complete intellectual and political emancipation.²⁹ Censorship is located in a specific agency, which works to control individuals. These individual writers are taken to be historical actors who operate exclusively on their free will when unhindered by the censors. The judiciary, administrators, legislators enacting decrees and laws, and executors of political power all play important roles in the establishment of conditions that allow or restrict critiques of civil and religious government and the founding values of a society. Censorship can therefore at best be depicted as the clash of two competing intellects, which represent coherent and contending worldviews. Its very existence morally sanctions those who act as censors as well as allowing censored writers to identify strongly as victims of an oppressive power. Where no censorship is evident, it is often assumed that the text corresponds to the intention of the author³⁰; where this is not the case, interference from alternative agents can, in theory, be detected and filtered out. Whether it is reasonable or tyrannical, censorship comes from outside and intrudes upon the intentions of individuals. It is necessarily something alien and extrinsic. Leo Strauss’ *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is the most intense, if not necessarily historically accurate, use of this approach, as this research will show. From his perspective the intellectual history of the West is viewed as a constant confrontation between writers and censors taking on different

²⁶Wortham 2002: 196.

²⁷Holquist 1994: 109, 18, 16.

²⁸*Censorship* 2001.

²⁹The following books by Heinrich Hubert Houben exemplify the dichotomic approach to censorship: Houben 1918; Houben 1926; Houben 1928.

³⁰See Firpo 1961.

forms, from classical antiquity to the Arab Middle Ages to early modern Europe. Writers and censors are intrinsically at odds. Their contest is played out in the readers' minds. "Writing between the lines" is seen as the only technique that effectually removes the damage inflicted by censors, because in doing so, the author "can perform the miracle of speaking in a publication to a minority, while being silent to the majority of his readers".³¹ The perceived outcome of this struggle between censors and authors is obvious and foregone. "A careful writer of normal intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor, as such. For the burden of proof rests with the prosecutor. It is he, or the public prosecutor, who must prove that the author holds or has uttered heterodox views. In order to do so he must show that certain literary deficiencies of the work are not due to chance, but that the author used a given ambiguous expression deliberately, or that he constructed a certain sentence badly on purpose. That is to say, the censor must prove not only that the author is intelligent and a good writer in general, for a man who intentionally blunders in writing must possess the art of writing, but above all that he was on the usual level of his abilities when writing the incriminating words. But how can that be proved, if even Homer nods from time to time?"³² The writer's struggle with censors is so central and crucial that the Enlightenment project to do away with censorship per se and make all texts accessible to all mankind provokes serious misgivings on Strauss' part. Delegitimizing the censors' *raison d'être* was part and parcel of the version of Enlightenment that Strauss so strenuously opposed. Censors belong to an order where knowledge is reserved to a small community of readers who are able to grasp the real meaning of the texts: in this conception censors are as hideous as they are necessary to the working of a just society.

Strauss' essay has not, until recently, been widely incorporated into the historical research,³³ but it is representative of an understanding of censorship that stresses the clear distinction between the censors and censored, while accentuating the opposition between those who wield power, be they civil or ecclesiastical, and those who must endure its effects and have their freedom curtailed.³⁴ Writers and readers are heroes struggling to affirm the truth, which is in jeopardy.

Analyses of the Roman Inquisition, which was accomplished at devising forms of strict censorship, have often painted censors and authors as contending wills. This black-and-white picture has its own Pantheon, a showcase of forbidden, mutilated, expurgated and burnt books: from the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin to Descartes', from Galileo Galilei's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (*Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*) to the newspapers reporting on the French Revolution and Kant's late writings on religion. Historians of censorship, and intellectual life in general, tend to emphasize censorship as an impediment to political and intellectual progress; this "externalist" approach how-

³¹ Strauss 1980: 22–38, 25. The first version was published in Strauss 1941. See also Van Den Abbeele 1997; Kochin 2002.

³² Strauss 1980: 26.

³³ Jaffro, Frydman, Cattin, Petit 2001. See Paganini 2005: 11–5.

³⁴ For the tension between canon and censorship see Assmann, Assmann 1987: 11.

ever can be subverted by those opposed to the principle of freedom of the press and speech. The same Pantheon would then display the portraits of the hundreds of censors who struggled valiantly to save Europe from the horrors wrought by the printing press.

The flaws of both approaches are now clear. The internalist interpretation, particularly in vogue in the last two decades, has correctly demonstrated the overly dichotomic underpinnings of the externalist idea of censorship and has called attention to the more pervasive forms of censorship that go beyond pre-publication and post-publication controls of the press. The extension of the conceptual framework of censorship has helped to deepen the understanding of freedom of speech and of the press in early modern Europe. However, in their conceptual expansion of the meaning of censorship, internalist approaches tend to lose sight of the specific contexts and individuals involved in the process of significantly altering or suppressing, texts and images, while their insistence on the ubiquity of censorship does not fit easily into an historical analysis that stresses the nexus between impersonal practices and personal, highly individualized choices by all parties to the process.

On the other hand, the externalist approach has unduly valorized both the censors and the censored so that the common understanding that made the operation of censorship possible is excluded from the picture. Censors are portrayed as all-powerful agents committed to the imposition of state and church orthodoxy on writers and engaged in a relentless struggle with the forces of progress. It has exaggerated the censors' efficacy, functionality, and possibly their integrity, as well as authors' commitment to unrestrained freedom of self-expression. It has also underrated, among other things, the importance of practical issues such as copyright protection and the promotion of the local printing industry, which both demanded a certain toleration for morally objectionable but bestselling books. Moreover, the externalist approach necessitates a teleological progression, since it envisages total freedom of expression as the necessary and logical, if possibly distant outcome of the recurring clash between censors and censored.

The approach to censorship theory and practice, proposed here, tries to avoid the pitfalls inherent in both the internalist and externalist approaches, in that it charts the development of control institutions and the behaviour of censors throughout Europe in the early modern age. The time span extends from the invention of the printing press and the ensuing establishment of a system of control until the principle of the freedom of the press was proclaimed and finally integrated into constitutions at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The European framework is especially valuable as it shows the common features of the control systems as well as the potential for autonomous developments that took place over the course of three centuries and which resulted in a highly differentiated array of censorship legislations and practices. The different attitudes to the dangers inherent in the circulation of ideas reflected the sensitivity of governing elites to local situations, but also the underlying notion that among governments' duties, control of the circulation of discourses was vital and that the principle of a free press had to face limits and qualifications in practice. The early modern age experimented with control and freedom of the press to an extent that only a comparative investigation

can put in perspective and do justice to. Its final outcome, the declaration of the freedom of the press as an inalienable right of man, inaugurated a new phase in this long process of experimentation and negotiation: it did not do away with the problem of control but the revolutionary assault on ancien regime censorship fundamentally delegitimized a system of censorship that had prevailed for three centuries. Although it came in many forms, of varying degrees of efficacy and thoroughness, censorship was invariably a component of the production of printed texts.

How did it arise that throughout Europe a system of control was dismantled? Did, as Venturi has suggested, a common pace of change in political culture and reform influence the way the printing press was managed?³⁵ The censorship system was, in fact, part of a more comprehensive judicial system which informed many of its features. A writer or printer who circumvented censorship offended not only their fellow citizens but the divinely ordained society and polity embodied in the monarch. As such the monarch had the right to prevent the publication of certain words and discourses. Not just plainly subversive but implicitly disruptive voices had to be silenced. Their eventual acceptance means that a fundamental shift had taken place beyond the institutional framework.

Europe and Asia: To What Extent Were They Different?

In the following pages an attempt will be made to reconstruct the main features of the process through which a system of control of the press was created as a response to the invention of movable type. Unsystematically at first, in the early sixteenth century, but with increasing consistency (but never perfectly coherently), censors had to grapple with conditions wherein the spread of printed texts generated as many positive opportunities for their authors and producers as it did potential dangers to the status quo. The growth of a network of printing houses catering to new social and intellectual groups could hardly be completely controlled. The unstable balance between the burgeoning productive activities of writing and publication and the secular and ecclesiastical agencies of control in pre-revolutionary Europe was challenged repeatedly and adapted to new circumstances and governmental demands during the Enlightenment. The system of censorship eventually collapsed and disappeared, if only temporarily and partially, during the revolutionary crisis at the end of the eighteenth century. In the following argument the concept of censorship will generally be employed in its broadest sense, as a means of exerting a preventive check on pre-publication texts by institutions which had outlived their functional efficacy in the eighteenth century.³⁶ While the present argument necessitates the sketching of a broad view of the workings of early modern European censors, it by

³⁵Venturi 1971.

³⁶There has been a recent scholarly interest in the neo-classical notion of censorship as the appropriate instrument to stop forms of behaviour that harm society but cannot be sanctioned by law. Examples of this understanding of censorship range from Bodin and Althusius to Filangieri and the

no means coheres with the overly teleological analysis of the inevitability of the abolition of preventative censorship under the contradictions of an unstable balance of control and production. The objective of this reconstruction is rather to show how the tension between the different components of intellectual production was managed. Each component was experimenting in its own domain with how best to deal with the practical and intellectual consequences of the evident expansion of personal autonomy. Each component was confronted with an incipient reconfiguration of the fundamental values of society (particularly dreaded by conservatives) and with the threat of the social and political cost that a systematic repression of illegal forms of expression would have entailed, as well as with the possibility that society could be emancipated from pre-publication control of printed texts and that authors and printers would be able to self-regulate. The constant flux of these tensions and the never ending process of adjustment to the political, institutional and intellectual developments can be interpreted as an argument for the vitality of the absolutist approach to censorship rather than as evidence of its impending end. Freedom of the press came to be considered an inalienable human right as the consequence of a variety of intersecting developments to be analyzed in the context of a simple question: how was it possible that a crucial pillar of the early-modern European societal equilibrium was radically de-legitimized and eventually dismantled (albeit temporarily) in a relatively short time span?

Before turning to the theory and practice of censorship in early modern Europe and to its demise in the eighteenth century, it might be useful to stress one point that is rarely mentioned in the historiography on censorship and freedom of the press. In exerting strict pre-publication surveillance upon texts intended for the wider public, European institutions were not acting significantly differently from non-European political organizations confronted with complex intellectual and political settings. During what is conventionally known as the early modern period in Europe, other governments, while obviously unaware of the practice and theory of censorship in Catholic and reformed countries, faced the same problem of controlling the spread of texts that might jeopardize the political, religious and social status quo. A fully-fledged comparative history of regulatory decisions from a global perspective remains elusive but a few remarks on the regulation of the printing press and the circulation of published texts in the Chinese Empire and in Japan from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries allow the essential features of the European experience to be seen in perspective.³⁷

When the Manchu, Qing dynasty conquered Beijing in 1644 and gradually consolidated its control of Chinese territory, there was a widespread fear that those who remained loyal to the defeated Ming dynasty could disseminate legitimist discourses through their writings by praising Han nationalism against all foreigners, which implicitly included the new Manchu rulers. In 1661 a new edition of an old Ming history was considered to be insulting to the new Qing emperor: its author's bones

deputy at the Convention Piqué (1793). This neo-classical notion will not be treated here. See Bianchin 2005a, 2010.

³⁷ See Darnton 1995a, 2005; Landi 2011b; *La censura nel secolo dei lumi* 2011.

were exhumed and publicly burnt, while the surviving members of his family and all those involved in the publication, including engravers, printers, book sellers, the authors of different prefaces and all those who had purchased copies, were either traded as slaves or beheaded. Under the emperor Kangxi (1662–1722), later under his successor Yongzheng (1723–1735) and above all under Qianlong (1736–1796) control was tightened, despite the increasing stability and acceptance of the Manchu dynasty, and culminated in an attempt to strictly regulate all aspects of intellectual life.³⁸ One consequence of this control project was the 1724 prohibition to profess a Christian faith. Christianity was considered a sect, founded by a rebel to legitimate authority, which would inevitably stir up revolts in China. Moreover, according to the Qing authorities, Christian confessions resembled the rites of the sect of the white lotus and the Jesuits were suspected of carrying out alchemical experiments. The Catholic printing press was very active from the 1650s thanks to Xu Guangqi, whose life was narrated by the Jesuit Couplet in an edifying biography in 1688, but was henceforth repressed and annihilated.³⁹ The prohibition of mentioning or alluding to politically relevant questions even extended to taboo words that were inadmissible in printed texts. In particular the names of the living emperor could not be reproduced and the authors had to leave a blank space or use another character or a character that was purposely modified or incomplete. Usually texts that violated this rule were not destroyed and the character was simply replaced. Nonetheless, these were cases of *lèse-majesté*, a crime against the dignity of the emperor which could also trigger dramatic and unpredictable reactions. This is true also for those texts that *might be read* as offensive to the emperor. Unlike European writings, ideograms can suggest allusions both through their sound and through the shape of the ideogram. In 1726, one line in a text submitted in an examination to enter the bureaucracy meant: “where the people are resting”. If one dash above the first character and one below the last were deleted the meaning would be: “the emperor is beheaded”. The author-suspect in this case died during his interrogation and his text was destroyed. Traditionally, no controls were exerted on erotic texts. Sex was not a taboo subject, but increasingly in the eighteenth century official attitudes towards erotic literature became more rigid and in 1738 a decree was issued forbidding owners of bookshops to provide short-term loans of what were considered to be obscene books. More generally, the literate elites looked upon popular literature with contempt and stressed the value of works conceived as props for morality and which sustained social values. Pornographic books or ghost stories were forbidden but remained preserved in private libraries. A distinctive trait of Confucian culture, unlike Buddhist culture, is that images are disdained and text is exalted as the meaningful core of the book.

Three features of press control and book diffusion in imperial China stand out from a comparative perspective. The first feature relates to the history of xylographic printing by means of engraved wooden blocks which made the circulation of publi-

³⁸ Mote 1998; For a comprehensive review essay focusing on works in Mandarin see Brockaw 2007.

³⁹ Mungello 1999: 42–5.

cations so pervasive that untargeted prohibitions were bound to fail. Proscriptive measures were aimed at political works produced for the literate elite. Control of the printing press did not therefore impact negatively upon book production, which remained quite strong. Under both the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial government supported printing shops at provincial and county levels, where authorized editions of the classics, histories, dictionaries and medical books were produced for use in schools and academies.

The second salient characteristic pertains to the concept of censorship itself. In imperial China, censorship could only be a post-publication operation because xylographic printing required neither specialized skills nor sophisticated instruments so that the reproduction of texts was easy which rendered prohibition largely ineffective. Hence no attempt was made to set up a system of pre-publication manuscript control. An imperial decree of 1778, which charged provincial directors with the control of manuscripts, remained a dead-letter.⁴⁰ A list of forbidden books was drawn up only after their publication which reflected the criteria that authors were expected to meet. The absence of a grass-roots system of preventive control led to a repressive approach that was unpredictably ferocious but unsystematic.⁴¹ Extensive self-censorship ensued and increasingly replaced the Confucian principle that one should speak frankly to the emperor. The third feature is the exclusively political nature of the control of the printing press. The notion of order was crucial, while religious eclecticism was accepted, the occasional attack on Taoism and Buddhism notwithstanding. The book as an artifact attracted great respect in imperial China: it was prized as a contribution to stability in the universe as it was evidence that man is different from animals. This deference for books inspired the creation of an association devoted to the cult of printed books. Its members collected and ritually burned all fragments of printed paper they could gather. As late as 1886, a Presbyterian missionary in Suzhou, DuBose, insisted on the ancient origins of this cult and interpreted it as an aspect of Chinese devotion for the “written character” and knowledge expressed in a sacrificial religious rite to the letters, to Confucius, to the god of literature. Such an attitude to books was intertwined with the desire to regulate the printing sector. Associations similar to the one described by DuBose supported the government’s efforts to enforce the prohibition of obscene literature by destroying the wooden blocks engraved with the offensive or offending text. The real aim of these associations was the purification of society and individuals, the preservation of the dignity of the written word and deference for literature and the rejection of commodification.⁴²

In Japan, the development of the system which controlled the circulation of texts was markedly different. Until the end of the sixteenth century, Buddhist monasteries enjoyed an exclusive monopoly over the printing press. The production of printed texts for the general public began in Kyoto in the early seventeenth century, when

⁴⁰ Brokaw 2005: 18 highlights that authorities used to crack down on books they considered to be dangerous.

⁴¹ See Brook 2004: 127.

⁴² McDermott 2006.

temporarily, the printing press with movable type replaced xylographic technology. The latter in turn prevailed and after the mid-seventeenth century successfully supplied a booming market.⁴³

Here, repression of printed literature was occasioned by the anti-Christian campaign and began with the 1630 decree that banned the importation of books from China, including 32 works by Matteo Ricci. The ban was renewed and reinforced in 1676 when a catalogue was drawn up of Christian books not to be imported. In the late seventeenth century, a magistrate in Nagasaki was appointed with the task of stopping Chinese books about Christianity from entering Japan. Pressure mounted with demands for the regulation of production of printed texts by rigorist Confucian sects, especially poems and historical narrations which could easily be used to lead people astray.⁴⁴ The ban was later lifted in order to allow scientific literature from Europe, particularly Holland to be imported. Domestic circulation of printed texts was the responsibility of the guild of book traders, which was officially incorporated between 1716 and 1723. The shogun government only interfered with the circulation of books under exceptional circumstances, the prohibition of books favourable to the Tokugawa dynasty's rivals, for instance.

As soon as the ability of the guild of book traders to manage the increasing quantity of books on the market was proven, decrees were issued inventorizing unacceptable books. In particular, publications critical of the authorities and which 'spread gossip' were targeted. The inventories however were largely ignored by both producers and traders. The situation changed following the edicts of 1721 and 1722 which forbade the publication of new books, with the exception of medical textbooks, poems and religious, non-Christian works, such as Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian texts. Even if a new text seemed worthy of publication, an official authorization was required before printing could proceed. The frontispiece of the book had to include both the author's and printer's names. This preventive censorship was carried out by the guild of book traders. Many of the texts that were deemed unlikely to pass the censor's assessment would be sold on the clandestine market of illegal books or handwritten and circulated in manuscript form.⁴⁵ At the end of the eighteenth century, the bans were renewed and multiplied, indicating that they went unheeded. At the same time, readers' numbers increased: more and more Japanese purchased books and subscribed to bookshops that lent publications for a monthly fee. (There were around 800 such circulating libraries in Edo in the late-eighteenth century).⁴⁶ Legal prints had to display the seal of the censor who had cleared the text for publication. Authors and printers who did not observe this procedure, dating from 1721 to 1722, were persecuted. As in China, calendars and astrological forecasts were forbidden, as they might justify rebellions. Since calendars could prove the harmony of the universe with the government, the government aspired to control their production. Pre-publication censorship and post-publication repression were

⁴³ *Cambridge History of Japan* 1991: 726.

⁴⁴ See Maruyama 1974: 38; Akinari 2009: 13.

⁴⁵ Kornicki 2001.

⁴⁶ *Cambridge History of Japan* 1989: 68.

intended to insulate Japan from contact with Western culture and prevent public criticism of the government. Following a similar trajectory to many European states in the post-Napoleonic period, responsibility for the application of preventive censorship was transferred, from the guild of book traders to the members of the Bakufu Academy in 1842. In consequence, both procedure and criteria were tightened and censorship became even more meticulous and effective under the Meiji.⁴⁷

China and Japan exhibit a variety of combinations where violent and sometimes ruthless repression alternated, or was coupled with, various forms of pressure on writers and printers to exercise the virtues of prudence and self-control.

Seen from this perspective, the history of censorship institutions in these political systems demonstrates that many of the elements which played a major role in early modern Europe were also central to the process in China and Japan. In particular, the creation of a systematic Index of forbidden books in Catholic countries was meant to address the need to regulate the public's reading that the Japanese hierarchy also considered crucial. The semi-public functions performed by the Japanese book traders' guild is also reminiscent of similar arrangements in *Ancien Régime* France to impose discipline in the production and circulation of legal books.

It may be argued therefore that the variety of forms of control, adjusted to social and political settings and to the technical specificities of book production, devised in Europe and Asia were broadly similar in form, timing and their anxiety about the negative effects of the unrestrained articulation and circulation of thoughts in print. This empirical evidence raises the question of how and why some European countries during the early modern era considered it inevitable, or useful, or appropriate to give up the traditional forms of control on the press. As a first approximation, it may be claimed that the tension within the control institutions themselves between contrasting interests and agendas was a source of debate as to the fairness and efficacy of prepublication authorization. Debates around the legal intricacies of censorship lent themselves to discussion of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of control. When it was proven that the attempt to put "a shell as hard as steel" on printing and publication stifled rather than protected or regulated it, when it ground down intellectual and scientific activity rather than sustaining it, significant portions of European societies came to agree that the harm to the commonwealth and the violation of individual rights which resulted from preventative censorship were unacceptable. For a short time at the end of the eighteenth century public institutions had to adapt and conform to dramatic new intellectual and political circumstances.⁴⁸ The following pages will present and analyze a number of examples of how the control system was put under scrutiny and eventually dismantled and of how European governments groped towards a compromise between censors' control and free expression.

⁴⁷ On the long-term effects on book trade during the Tokugawa period see Mitchell 1983.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive bibliography see *Grundfreiheiten Menschenrechte 1500–1850*. 1992. Vol. 4, chapter 8: *Meinungs- und Pressefreiheit – Freiheit der Forschung und der Lehre*: 257–338; May 2010.