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Censorship and secularization in the Enlightenment

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Censorship and secularization have long been uncontested and unambiguous notions, widely used in the historical scholarship in general and in the eighteenth-century studies in particular. To the generation of Ernst Cassirer, Peter Gay, Franco Venturi, to name just a handful of outstanding and influential researchers, there could be no doubt that the European Enlightenment was a major step on the way to emancipate mankind from the shackles of oppression coming from superstition and ignorance. To put it differently, the movement called the Enlightenment was a collective effort first to defeat censorship, mainly managed by the agencies of the Catholic church and, to be sure to a lesser degree, of protestant ecclesiastical institutions, and by the conservative social groups around the royal courts and second to promote religious freedom within the framework of a sustained progress towards secularization.

In what follows I will focus on some evidence showing that, while this general argument is right, as indeed the Enlightenment has been part of a discussion in favor of more freedom of expression and a more rational mindset, we must acknowledge that both notions, censorship and secularization, require a careful investigation and that the practice and theory of censorship and secularization are a much more nuanced subject in the Enlightenment studies than it was generally assumed half a century ago. Before turning to some examples of how writers were involved in censorship and secularization and how they fit into a general interpretation of the European Enlightenment, a few words on censorship and secularization in the 18th—century may be welcome. In the 18th century none had the same meaning as in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is a trivial statement in itself, it nonetheless indicates that these concepts and historical categories developed in unpredictable ways.

In the different European languages secularization meant the transition from belonging to a religious order to living life as a priest in the world (*saeculum*). According to the *Encyclopédie*, this shift marked a change in the position of

individuals in the composite setup of ancient regime society, but it also meant a moral advancement from the dark and secluded world of the religious orders, subjected as they were to the blind obedience required by the ecclesiastical discipline, and the progress towards a more open and tolerant understanding of human society. Secularization also meant that the civil power had a right to claim for itself ecclesiastical properties when there was a legal justification to do that. During the 18th century in fact, secularizing church properties in Catholic countries implied that the civil authority was redressing the proper balance in society between the Catholic Church (and occasionally the Anglican Church), whose wealth came to be perceived as excessive, and the common people making up the majority of the population and taking the brunt of the degeneration of the ecclesiastical institution. The suggestion made in the anonymous entry of the *Encyclopédie* expressed the blueprint for a variety of measures taken by the European governments before the French revolution. Reducing the economic and juridical role of the Catholic Church was parallel to the decrease of religion as a point of reference for social life in all its various aspects. However, it was only in the mid-19th century that secularization shifted its meaning from the juridical and political field to the cultural and social sphere to indicate the process of cutting down the role of the churches and religious beliefs and practices in public and private life and of enhancing the importance of worldly goods, knowledge, and social values. A disenchanting world is the core of secularization, according to the major theorists of secularization. With the benefit of hindsight, the anticlerical liberals and socialist secularists projected onto the thinkers of the Enlightenment their own intention to legitimize the deep changes in society and state that the dual revolution of the late 18th century had produced and applied the concept of secularization to this process that they projected onto the 18th century. After enjoying immense popularity among social scientists, secularization has become the target of sustained criticism. Secularization in the 18th century, so its critics maintain, is a militant and non-scientific concept that has no place in a historical discussion¹. There are indeed good reasons to reject the teleological implications that

¹ Hunter, I., *Secularization. The Birth of a Modern Combat Concept*, *Modern Intellectual History* 12, pp. 1-32 (2015); Borutta, M., *Genealogie der Säkularisierungstheorie. Zur Historisierung einer grossen Erzählung der Moderne, Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 36, pp. 347-376 (2010). For an overview of the

have been associated with secularization in the modernization theory. Discarding secularization as a viable concept to describe the changes that occurred in the European society in the late 18th century is, however, far-fetched. Secularization is a necessary component in the historian's toolbox to understand the deep-cutting change occurring in the *Sattelzeit*.

The word "Censorship" in its different versions still had an echo of the Roman meaning (*censura*) of the exercise of the moral judgement to be enforced by civil magistrates, while the exercise of the control of the press was a part of the more complex understanding of public authority, that went beyond the mere defense of the legal, social, religious order of society and included the support of the printing sector and the dissemination of moral paradigms. Control of the press might develop into a factor of change, a driving force behind policies of tolerance and multiconfessionalism. The instability of these concepts was reflected in the fluidity of the approaches that writers and censors took when they faced with situations that looked comparatively open-ended. Contrary to what has been argued very often, censorship might play the role of an emancipatory force, if properly reformed and adequately staffed.

The French enlightenment presents us with a number of writers who dealt with the implications of more freedom of expression and dissemination.

The first case in point is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A fuller analysis of Rousseau and his oeuvre would lead us too far away. I will deal here exclusively with his confrontation with censorship, highlighting what we might call the ambiguities and paradoxes of Rousseau.

Rousseau had first-hand experiences that he worked out in the fifth of his *Letters Written from the Mountain* in 1764. He saw the *Encyclopédie* under attack twice, he saw the Paris Parliament and the Archbishop of Paris prevail over the Librairie in the case of Helvetius' *de L'Esprit*, he saw his friend Diderot in prison for publishing forbidden texts in the late 1740s, but first and foremost he came directly in touch with the French censorship since the beginning of his literary career. He knew the rules, explicit and implicit, that ran the business of

discussion see Hübinger, G., "Säkularisierung". Ein umstrittenes Paradigma der Kulturgeschichte. In Dimensionen der Moderne. Festschrift für Christof Dipper. Herausgegeben von Ute Schneider und Lutz Raphael unter Mitarbeit von Sonja Hillerich, Peter Lang Frankfurt am Main, pp. 93-106 (2008).

publishing in France. Rousseau was certainly no enemy of censorship. He claimed that some sort of control on printing was necessary to stop the corruption menacing modern society. In the *Contrat social* Rousseau praised Caliph Omar for having ordered the burning of the library of Alexandria in his second *Discourse* and maintained that policing the opinions of the people would lead to a purification of their mores and that this is the responsibility of the magistrates (*Contrat social*, IV, chap. 7). How could he claim that the persecution of books in general and of his books in particular was illegal and unjust? The fifth of the *Lettres écrites de la montagne* addresses these questions. It does so in a subtle way, with two overlapping sets of problems: the juridical questions linked to the control of the press in Geneva and by extension in France and in Europe in general, and the responsibility and actual behavior of the authors in his own days. Rousseau was a notorious egomaniac, but his remarks, while deeply idiosyncratic, make in fact a general case about how governments and writers should act. His departure point is that writers have to comply with the laws. There is no subversive aim in Rousseau's ideas, at least no plainly subversive aim. He agrees that governments have a right to control the dissemination of ideas among the people. But a distinction is crucial: this applies to all those who speak: orality is a threat, written words are not, while dogmatizing (*dogmatiser*) in schools, in the churches, and in the open spaces can lead to turmoil, can excite the passions of the rabble, and jeopardize social peace. Teachers and preachers are subject to control, self-appointed orators are banned. What about authors? Books rouse no mob. They don't convene readers together, don't push them to action: on the contrary, they allow readers plenty of time to reflect and reply. And books are not intended for the lower strata of the population who are the real danger. Rousseau points out a fundamental difference between orality and printed books. As talking is an ongoing activity, it can only be stopped by preventing the teacher, preacher, or orator from getting in contact with his or her listeners. So, imprisonment is an adequate measure for them, but it is not for writers: imprisoning a writer is useless, as books that are allegedly bad will be passed around nonetheless, possibly more than before². More importantly than that, books are the medium for expressing thoughts, not for attacking the honor of individuals. *Raisonner* is the proper

² Oeuvres complètes III, p. 784.

object of books, and reasoning cannot cause offense to anybody. Rousseau clearly argues that writers have a right to be free in their activity, and especially so if they acknowledge their opinions by putting their name on the titlepage. Author and book then become the same entity and must be respected as such. Books discussing religious questions are no exception, provided that they don't offend the religious practice of anybody. It is understandable that Rousseau doesn't mention prepublication censorship in this *Letters written from the mountain*. But he mentions what he calls "un usage malentendu" "a misunderstood usage" of the press. A misuse occurs when authors don't search for the good: instead, many of them, by far the majority, are driven by ambition or self-interest (791). It is the transparency and sincerity of the authors that laws should protect and encourage. So, Rousseau strongly believed in the writer's responsibility to be himself, that is to be free in his pursuit of the good, and looked down on those who misjudge the consequences of their being free in publishing.

Freedom from authority could be gained only at the price of a commitment to the common good that implied both a careful selection of ideas to be treated in print and the empathy with public opinion. Max Weber's metaphor of a "shell as hard as steel" applies to Rousseau's paradoxical notion that freedom could be granted only to those who abode by the requirements of a free, transparent, and stable society. In 1754, in his letter to the abbe Perdriau, Rousseau wrote that he was going to be his own censor³ and held on to his promise. Internalizing responsibility promised a way out from the persecution of governments and at the same time provided the means to get in touch with the "reasoning" public opinion that was establishing itself in those decades as the impartial tribunal monarchs and writers were bound to obey.

Montesquieu approached the problem from a different perspective. He was an archaic liberal who drew from classical antiquity and ethnographical surveys to find a polity that should preserve a variety of forms of freedom.

In the *Esprit des lois* readers could find one of the most open justifications of freedom of speech and of the press; although scattered in various parts of his oeuvre, there is constant concern for protecting the right to communicate thoughts

³ November 28, 1754, Corr. III, n. 258, p. 59: "Mon expérience m'a donc fait prendre la ferme résolution d'être désormais mon unique Censeur».

among free men. Liberty was the focus of Montesquieu's argument, and he carefully illustrated the limits that authority cannot trespass. These limits are consistently viewed as the natural protection of a free government. Three different arguments are applied to the issue of free communication of ideas by Montesquieu: the nature of communication; the advantages deriving from freedom of speech; the consequences of freedom of communication. The general assumption is that verbal and written communication marks out a space of liberty that free governments should not encroach on. While conceding that written texts are slightly more permanent and durable than spoken words, Montesquieu underlines in a skeptical vein that verbal as well as written communication is subject to a variety of conditions that make the indictment of an opinion as a cause of civil disorder very difficult and ultimately impossible. That speech can have a decisive impact on social events is seriously questioned, as befits an epistemology based on the complexity of factors interacting in the human experience and rejecting monocausality.

From what Montesquieu had argued any state censorship would seem to be incongruous. Montesquieu rejected the absolutist claim to control literary life as a step towards tyranny. In doing so Montesquieu argued for a free exchange of ideas as a principle of a liberal polity.

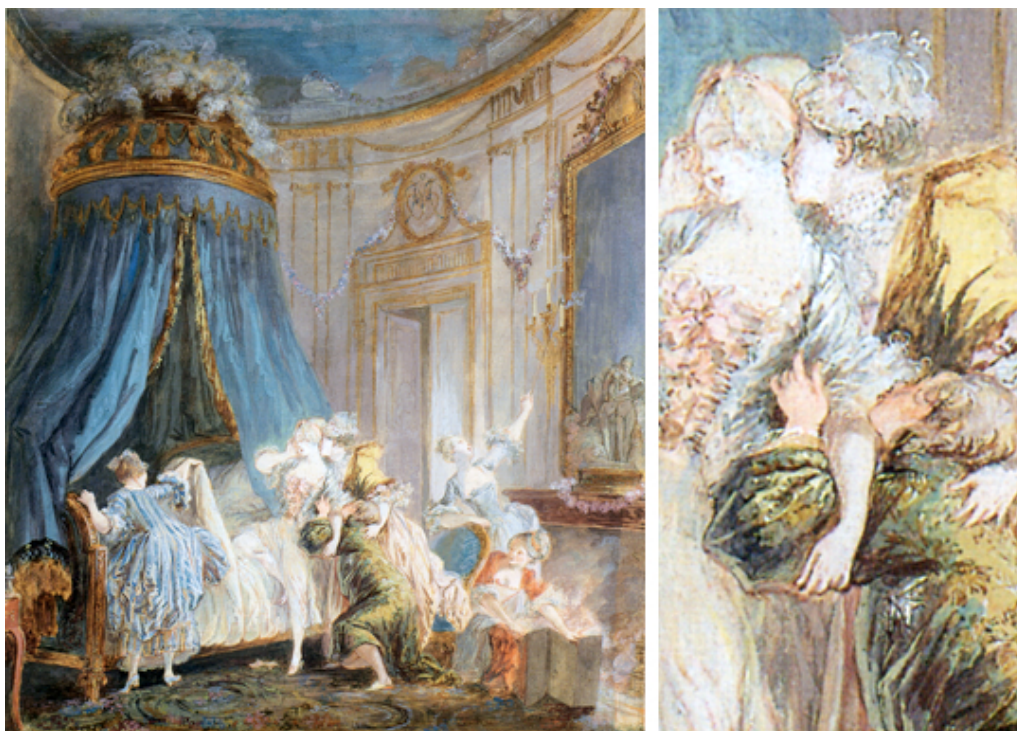
We have seen that Rousseau argued for the internalization and manipulation of censorship. Rousseau's position reflected the view of most French philosophes, including the most radical ones like d'Holbach. Ironically, it was Montesquieu, who has often been called a conservative political philosopher, who claimed, although between the lines, an unconditional right to speak and publish. It was Montesquieu who laid the foundation for the inclusion of the freedom of the press in the declarations of rights at the end of the century that redefined the notion itself of a just measure of freedom and opened a discussion in which we are deeply involved.

Despite his obvious wish for wider freedom of expression under the protection of the law, Diderot was acutely aware of the instability of the balance between oppression and license which characterized France. He also knew from first-hand experience, that the presence of spies in search of illegal books and manuscripts was pervasive and unlikely to be eluded.

In principle, Diderot was convinced that writing and publishing were forms of refinement which implied a commitment to truth and virtue. Seen from the

perspective of the philosophy of history, these human activities were meant to police the readers after the authors had undergone a process of refinement and correction themselves. This presupposition disqualifies any form of communication that rejected this fundamental commitment.

On a few occasions Diderot advocated government intervention to suppress forms of communication that he considered unacceptable. When a painting by Pierre-Antoine Baudouin was displayed in the 1767 Salon, Diderot could not help protesting forcefully. It was a gouache entitled *Le Coucher de la mariée* [*Bedtime for the Bride*] that alluded—according to Diderot quite explicitly—to female homosexuality.



He requested that the virtue of the younger generation be protected and that the painting be removed from the public exhibition: Beaudouin represented a number of women lasciviously preparing the half-naked bride for the first night of marriage in a way that Diderot decoded as plain pornography, which aroused the illicit desire of lesbian love. Diderot denounced Beaudouin's painting as

obscene and went a step further, reflecting on the import and the deeper sense of his denunciation:

*Diderot was definitely serious when, in June 1770, he suggested that Sartine should forbid the performance of the anonymous antiphilosophical play *Satirique ou L'homme dangereux* (authored by Palissot). His letter stressed the common ground between Sartine and the philosophes, as participants in a common enterprise for which future generations would be grateful, thereby extolling Sartine's role from the perspective of the advancement of civilization. Diderot also indirectly reminded Sartine that the philosophes deserved his consideration and, more forcefully, that the "impartial public" would rather side with them than with the lieutenant de police, who had the last word on the diffusion of the play.*

His personal acquaintance with the powerful Sartine was the best possible guarantee that Diderot could fully exploit the limits of the French form of freedom of the press while enjoying the protection of the law.

Mutual respect, and trust in the rationality of his readers were the basis of Diderot's understanding of freedom of the press. This vision endowed both parties with certain responsibilities. The censors had to have some sympathy for the progress of reason and the writers in turn had to show respect for both their readers and the government. Given the conservative nature of French cultural discourse, tensions were frequent and glaring. When it came to a confrontation with the institutions of the monarchy, the *philosophes* had to stand up for texts expressing their profoundly held opinions and pursue their mission as interpreters of reason. Failing to do so, as Helvétius had done, meant that as writers they were not up to their task. Diderot was all too aware that censors were not authors' ideal collaborators. He faced a choice between eluding censorship and having his texts printed abroad or circulating them in manuscript form, as he did frequently after 1759, or maintaining good relations with those censors, like Suard, who could be prevailed upon to grant permissions to publish or issue favourable judgments.

A substantial part of the censors who managed the everyday business of the Librairie would agree with Diderot.

In presuming that the French monarchy could allow for a very limited but slowly expanding freedom of the press, Diderot expressed a vision of domestic reform of censorship. From this point of view this *Lettre sur le commerce des livres*, addressed to Sartine in 1763 on behalf of the *Compagnie des libraires*, is neither surprising nor damaging to Diderot's posthumous reputation, as has been argued. In fact it is consistent with his perspective on a widening public discourse in which reason could be promoted without falling prey to the enemies of progress, intent for their part on spreading errors and misconceptions. Diderot practiced and pleaded for an increase in the use of *permissions tacites*: they would not radically alter the balance of the "book economy" and would be welcomed by both parties actively engaged in the production of knowledge, authors and printers. Through *permissions tacites*, the king could meet his commitment to promote the progress of civilization, and the *philosophes* would be encouraged to disseminate texts which favoured rational morality. A good "book politics" would, in this conception, profit from a more extensive use of *permissions tacites*.

In the *Lettre*, Diderot flatly rejected the abolition of royal censorship, as was the case with the English model. Instead he suggested a reduced pool of censors, employing only the most skilled and insightful individuals capable of carrying out this delicate and demanding task.

Diderot acknowledged the guild system to be a durable feature of the monarchy and a necessary link between all legal publishers and the royal censorship. He devised a scheme to pay for manuscripts submitted for approval: 18 *livres* for a volume in 12°, one Louis for an 8°, 36 *livres* for an in 4°, 48 *livres* for an in-folio.

His discussions, in 1769, with the physiocrats provided Diderot with the opportunity to articulate this outlook in more general terms. While he disagreed with them on the extent to which deregulation of the free grain trade was advisable, he nonetheless conceded that they had a crucial role to play in encouraging, "in the long run, the police, the court, and the magistrates [...] to heed all manner of ideas and the authors to speak out more boldly. Little by little the nation will grow accustomed to the issues of finance, trade, agriculture, legislation, politics". This balance was consistently unstable: freedom of expression was achievable only as long as censors were educated to be reasonable instruments of the absolute monarchy and writers were reminded of their responsibility towards the public.

In such a conception both censors and writers had to tread carefully to maintain free expression. The commitment to free investigation was consistent in principle with collaboration with royal censorship and was the prized, guiding principle of *philosophie*.

Were censors acting in a way compatible with Diderot's perspective? Not all of them but some were indeed.

Among them Jean-Baptiste-Claude Cadet de Saineville stands out as a particularly remarkable figure. He went to great lengths to document and provide careful explanations for his assessments, and he invariably framed his decisions within the context of his vision of the censor's responsibility, and of the authors' right to contribute to the well-being of the kingdom.

For Cadet de Saineville, a form of "participatory freedom" was an element of constitutional balance within the French monarchy as it associated authors with the monarchy in a common endeavour. To Cadet de Saineville, royal censorship as an institution fostered freedom of discussion in its optimal form. Not only was freedom of discussion compatible with the monarchy, but only the exercise of sovereignty via the censors allowed polarized opinions to grow into a productive discussion. Dissent was acknowledged and accepted, provided that it was mediated by the censors within the framework of shared fundamental values. The practice of royal censorship was part of the freedom of the press. Censors, Cadet de Saineville would have argued, encouraged and promoted intellectual activity; they did not stifle it. They underpinned the conditions for participation in a system that was supposed to encourage free dialogue, but they also suppressed texts which were incompatible with the principles of the French monarchy and the progress of civilization. Enlightened censorship promoted what we would define as secularization:

Cadet de Saineville recommended that the Recueil des lois constitutives des colonies angloises confédérées be granted a permission tacite but could not help remarking that the English editor's footnotes contained principles that were incompatible with absolutism: they "contain propositions on freedom of religion and on relations between the sovereign and the people which I could hardly agree with as a censor". He suggested that the reader should recognize that these footnotes were not by a French author. Like other more radical philosophes such as

Diderot and Raynal, who correctly perceived the political originality of the American constitutional settlement, Cadet de Saineville was baffled by the paradox of an absolutist monarchy supporting the creation of a pluri-confessional and predominantly Protestant republic, where freedom of the press was inscribed in the individual state constitutions. It was not the only paradox that perceptive observers detected in late 18th century Europe. Reforming censorship from within in order to promote multi-confessionalism and thorough religious toleration in an absolutist state was a far-fetched undertaking that could not withstand the powerful pressure embodied by the rhetoric of man's rights, that implied the abolition of any control of communication whatsoever and an open confrontation between contending religious and anti-religious views.

(COMUNICAÇÃO APRESENTADA À SESSÃO DEDICADA À EVOCAÇÃO DE FREI MANUEL DO CENÁCULO E A REAL MESA CENSÓRIA, NOS 250 ANOS DA SUA FUNDAÇÃO, A 23 DE OUTUBRO DE 2018)