

6-2015

Chapter 05 - Censorship

Meghan Link

Western Oregon University, mlink11@wou.edu

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Censorship

– Meghan Link –

Imagine being imprisoned for publishing personal opinions or ideas. This was a common punishment due to censorship. What is censorship? It is basically what happens when anything is deemed inappropriate by a government. Censorship suppresses speech, public communication, and other forms of information and literature¹.

In ancient Rome, censorship was regarded as an honorable task since it was ideal for good governance to shape the character of the people². Meaning that the Roman government was expected to decide what the people were taught, learned, and knew.

In ancient Chinese societies, censorship was also used for regulating the moral and political life of the population². Ultimately authors

and printers were forced to drink poison or sentenced to prison for corrupting the people through their illegal material. This sounds extreme, but it was done as a benevolent duty in the best interest of the public. For as long as the written word has existed, it has been targeted for censorship.

The invention and evolution of the printing press further encouraged the kind of disruptive writing and thinking that only increased the demand for censorship. More books were written, copied, and were now more widely disseminated. Ideas perceived as subversive and heretical were spread beyond

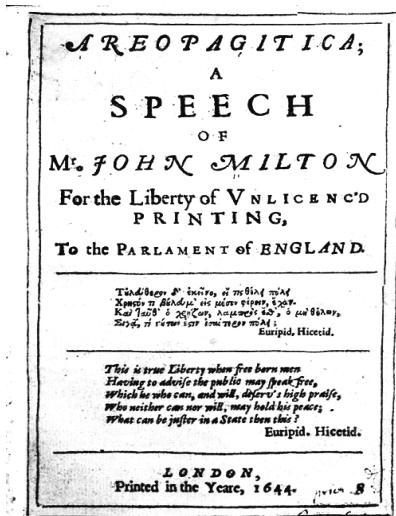


In this painting, *The Death of Socrates*, the other men, unlike the stoic Socrates, show emotional distress¹. Socrates was one of many writers sentenced to death due to censorship.

the control of the rulers, so what happens next? Censorship became more rigid and punishment more severe.

The Licensing Order of 1643

England's parliament instituted the Licensing Order of 1643 in an attempt to eliminate piracy and chaos in the printing industry, protect parliamentary activities, and suppress royalist propaganda³. The Licensing Order reintroduced strict censorship regulation including pre-publication licensing and registration of all printing materials with the names of author, printer, and publisher. Basically, the Licensing Order made it nearly impossible for controversial written work to be published because everything printed was required to be approved. In addition, authors, printers, and publishers were subject to search, seizure, and destruction of any books found to be offensive to the government. Arrest and imprisonment for any writers, printers, or publishers was common³. The Licensing Order made it particularly difficult to write or print anything unless approved by the Stationer's Company. This was a group of men appointed by the government to censor anything inappropriate according to them³.



John Milton's *Areopagitica*

John Milton vigorously opposed the Licensing Order in his plea for freedom of the press through his much disputed speech *Areopagitica*. In this work, Milton argued forcefully against the Licensing Order of 1643, which required authors to have a license approved by the government before their work could be published. Milton's purpose was to voice his grievances about the censorship regulations and concluded his introduction by encouraging Parliament to obey 'the voice of reason' and to be willing to repeal any act for the sake of

***Areopagitica* is regarded as one of the most eloquent defenses of press freedom ever written because many of its expressed principles form the basis for modern justifications of that right²**

truth and upright judgment⁴. Milton argued that Parliament's licensing order would fail to suppress scandalous, seditious, and slanderous books². He points out that Parliament will not protect the people from banned books through censorship because the books would more likely end up in the hands of the people in some way or another, and he was right.

Forbidden Books

The censorship system could not stop the production of oppositional literature during the Enlightenment. For example, French authors could publish controversial works in Switzerland, England, or the Netherlands⁵. Banned books were sought after and expensive. Readers were interested in the merging themes of pulp fiction like philosophical, sexual, and anti-monarchical interests, which further increased the fascination with reading banned books.

Banned material could not be handled in the same way as legal works. There were underground marginal entrepreneurs who were willing to take the risk of publishing illegal works⁹. In comparison to ordinary books, banned books were worth more on the market, cost more to produce, and involved greater risks along the process⁹. The prices of forbidden books began at a higher rate, usually twice that of an ordinary book. The price then dipped and soared depending on condemnations and police raids, which was always good publicity for the books and business

Trade Jargon

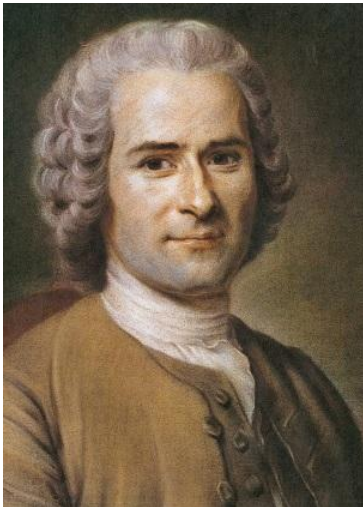
Language offered problems when trading forbidden literature because people could not openly talk about the various titles or subjects. There were terms used to talk about banned material like 'clandestine books,' 'drugs,' 'miseries,' and *mauvais livres* – 'bad books'⁹. Publishers and booksellers preferred to use the term *livres philosophiques* – 'philosophical books.' This term served as a signal in the commercial code to designate books that could get booksellers or publishers in trouble, books that were required to be handled with extra care and caution⁹. The elaborate trade process of forbidden books

relied on this code. Because everyone in the trade shared the code, the booksellers assumed their supplier would know what they were talking about when they issued orders such as ‘three copies of all your newest philosophical works’.

Contraband works were published in Swiss centers and then brought over the mountains to a merchant on the other side of the border of France⁵. Customs would rarely check an aristocrat’s baggage, providing the perfect secret route for illegal material. The underground book trade operated profitably alongside the legal production and sale of books⁵. There was always a ready market for works that ridiculed the degenerate court, the king’s sexual inability, and other political figures mixed with pornography; therefore, the forbidden books would continue to be published, dispersed, and read.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most influential philosophers during the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe. However, many people did not agree with his disruptive ideas. In his early work, Rousseau wrote in response to essay contests. He argued that the progression of the sciences and



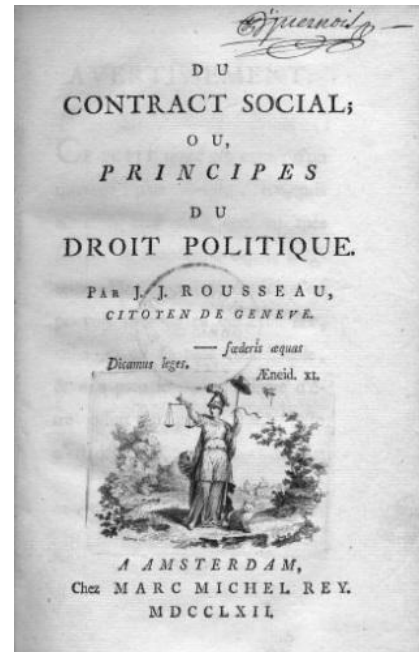
arts had caused corruption of virtue and morality, and that human beings are basically good by nature, but were corrupted by complex events that resulted in the present-day society⁷. Rousseau’s work was considered somewhat controversial, but yet people continued to read his work, which caused a disruption to the government’s censorship of what the people read and learned. In 1762, Rousseau’s works *The Social Contract* and *Émile* were published within months of each other. These works caused great controversy in France and were immediately banned by authorities⁸. Rousseau fled France and settled in Switzerland, but continued to face difficulties.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau³

The Social Contract

The Social Contract systematically outlines how a government could exist in such a way that it protects the equality and character of its citizens⁶. In Rousseau's opinion, the problem can be fixed by making a social contract in which the citizens give up some of their rights to the government in exchange for the government giving the citizens' equality and freedom⁸. The French authorities obviously disagreed with Rousseau's proposed social contract for they immediately banned *The Social Contract*.

Rousseau originally intended the political ideas expressed in *The Social Contract* to form part of a much larger and more elaborate work of literature, but ironically it was the brief and to the point pamphlet-like style, along with the banning in Paris, that made it very disruptive and popular.



***The Social Contract* was one of many of the forbidden books during the Enlightenment in Europe⁴**

Émile



As described in *Émile*, the teacher lets his pupil discover and reflect while teaching him to follow nature⁵

Émile is a work that details Rousseau's philosophy of education. Rousseau wrote *Émile* as part novel and part philosophical exposition. This work was written in first person with the narrator as the tutor, and Émile, the pupil, is described from birth to adulthood⁸. The major point of controversy that led to the banning of the book, was not his philosophy of education, but rather that it argues against traditional views of religion.

Rousseau's views on religion presented in his works struck some as conflicting with the doctrines of both Catholicism and Calvinism⁶. At the time, Rousseau's strong endorsement of religious tolerance was interpreted through *Émile* as advocating indifferentism, a heresy at the time. This also led to condemnation of the book in both Calvinist Geneva and Catholic Paris. Between the banning of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, Rousseau was subject to arrest and fled.

Regardless of the brutal and severe punishments for producing illicit material, authors, printers, and publishers continued manufacturing and selling forbidden books. Books proved to be disruptive because the freedom of expression through written works caused censorship and the banning of numerous amounts of literature.

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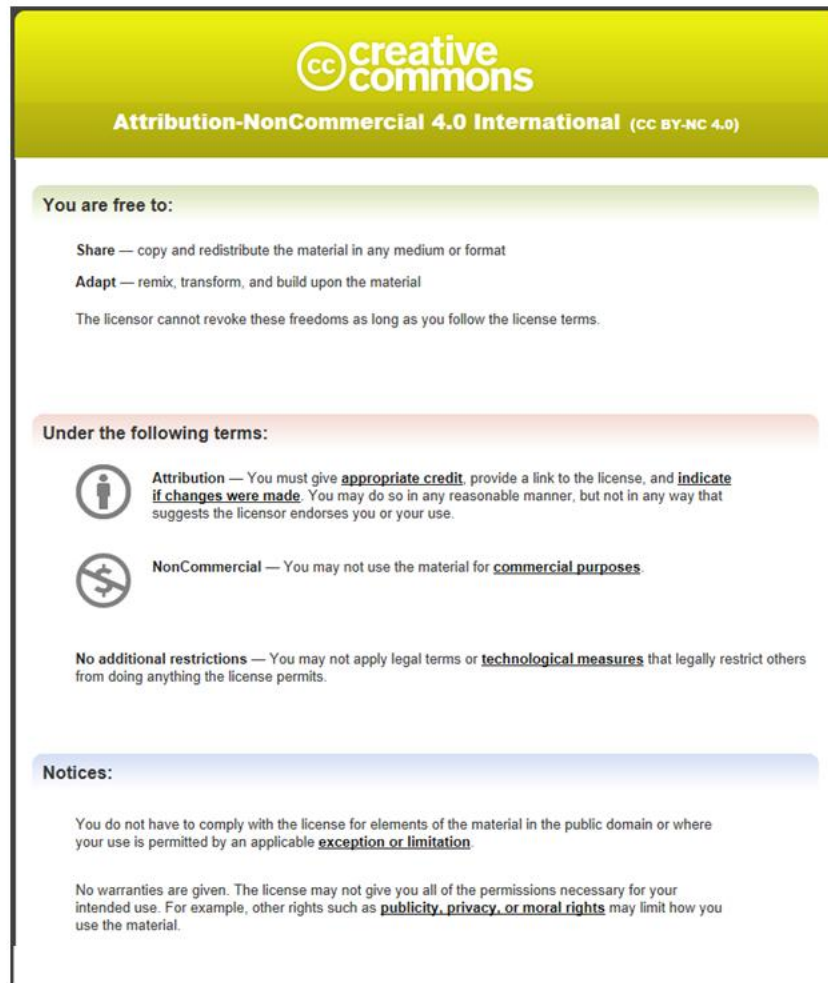
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2. Areopagitica, Public Domain (1643).
3. Portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Public Domain (1753).
4. The Social Contract, Public Domain (1990).
5. Emile, Public Domain (1982).

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