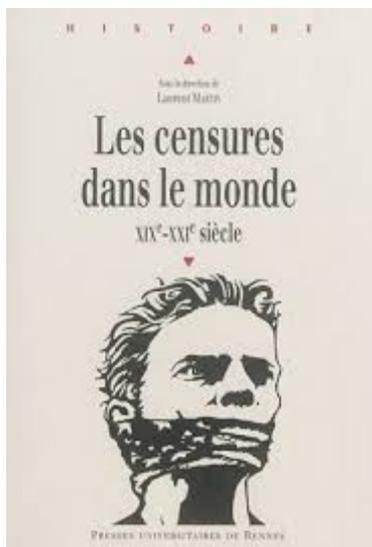


Laurent Martin (ed.), *Les Censures dans le monde: XIX^e-XXI^e siècle*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016, 381 p.

Peter Jelavich



This volume presents the papers delivered at a conference held in Paris in February 2014. Fourteen of the twenty-five essays deal with censorship in Europe, the rest with countries in North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The genres and media discussed include literature, journalism, photojournalism, political caricature, educational textbooks, theater, film, and music. Given the geographical, chronological, and generic breadth, the editor and the authors have adopted a wide definition of censorship, evoked by words like control, regulation, discipline, surveillance, constraint, and repression (Laurent Martin, “Les censures: une histoire ancienne, des formes nouvelles,” p. 11-12). The essays are divided into three thematic sections: the transition from repression by church and state to “liberal censorship” in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries;

repression by “liberal democracies” in the 20th and 21st centuries; and censorship by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (including fascism and communism).

In the course of a short review it is of course impossible to do justice to all of the essays, but some generalizations may be made. Censorship is generally applied to three themes: sexuality, politics, and religion. Before the modern era, and in current repressive regimes, censorship protected specific institutions and individuals: the Church, the King, the Leader, the (repeatedly re-“elected”) President. But over time, with the spread of democratic values, the public interest became the excuse for censorship: in liberal societies today, works can be suppressed in the name of national security, public order, or public morality. Since liberal democracies are generally loath to admit that they engage in censorship, they employ a rhetoric of normativity to justify suppression. In his study of the censorship of school textbooks in the United States, Jan Blauuw takes note of “control-related words” such as “proper,” “normal,” “responsible,” and “appropriate” (“Textbook Conflicts and Legitimacy Production,” p. 202). Of course, one could argue that the selection of textbooks for schools in the United States or Japan (cf. Christian Galan, “Education et censure au Japon”) —no matter how politically motivated— is not really censorship, since anyone is free to buy any textbook on the open market, even if they are not assigned to pupils. That is one of many areas where one can argue over the very

definition of censorship: it should not be so broad that every attempt by the government to influence opinion is decried as “censorship,” but also not so narrow that it includes only absolute prohibitions for everyone (cf. Claire Bruyère, “États-Unis, XX^e et XXI^e siècles: quelles censures?”).

Censorship is most openly and vigorously contested in liberal regimes —both parliamentary monarchies and democratic republics— that enjoy constitutional and legal protection for freedom of expression and freedom of the press, along with an independent judiciary and a robust public sphere. But that does not guarantee that citizens of such polities will always oppose censorship: indeed, pressure to increase censorship often comes “from below” (most obviously in the case of religious groups demanding harsher laws against “immorality” and obscenity). The continuous push-and-pull of public debate over censorship is evidenced by the fact that France’s law of 22 July 1881, guaranteeing freedom of the press, has been amended over fifty times during the ensuing decades (Patrick Eveno, “La Cour européenne des droits de l’homme contre la censure,” p. 179). Often the issue has been not tightening or loosening censorship *per se*, but weighing equally valid civil concerns: the more recent changes in the French law have sought to readjust the balance between the right to free expression and the protection of ethnic and religious groups from racist invective (cf. Hélène Eck and Agnès Granchet, “Liberté d’expression et ‘offense religieuse’ selon les droits français et européen, de 1905 à l’affaire Dieudonné (janvier 2014): respect des croyances et enjeux politiques”).

Censorship is rarely straightforward in liberal regimes; indeed, it can have paradoxical effects. Gary Stark highlights the “ironies of censorship,” such as the fact that once censorship is institutionalized, censors have a vested interest in finding objectionable material where none was seen before (“The Ironies of Censorship in Imperial Germany,” p. 72-75). In turn, many works that otherwise would have slumbered in obscurity become famous by being banned; censorship thus provides free advertising for little-known texts (p. 75-77). Most paradoxically, censors tend to exaggerate the impact of literature, while authors (seeking to avoid proscription) downplay the significance of what they have written (p. 82).

The ambiguities of censorship in liberal societies give authors and artists considerable leeway in devising tactics and ruses to transmit their ideas without being silenced entirely. Frédéric Hervé provides a useful list of strategies employed by postwar French film producers to pass the censorship boards that existed there until 1975—strategies that were used in other countries and other media as well. Through “délocalization,” a film that would have been banned if the story were set in France was acceptable if placed in Belgium, Germany, or Italy (“Stratégies censurales et professionnelles dans le cadre du contrôle des films en France (1945-1975),” p. 125). Through “moral endings,” a film replete with criminality or sexual immorality would pass if, at the conclusion, the gangsters ended in jail, or the couple married in church (p. 126). Would-be attacks on institutions or groups of people could be ameliorated through “déssexemplarisation,” whereby the filmmaker could argue that he was depicting just one particular and unusual, rather than a socially widespread case: originally entitled *La Femme mariée*, Godard’s film had to be renamed *Une Femme mariée* (p. 129). Such games satisfied the censors and allowed filmmakers to present their social critiques; in the end, members of the public could see what they wanted in

the films, depending on their own censorious or subversive inclinations.

The situation is much graver in polities controlled by authoritarian rulers and totalitarian dictators. But even in systems where people can be silenced by a simple *Diktat* from the Leader, less overt means of control can be employed. Uncertainty is one common tool, for example in fascist Italy, where censorship was exercised by local prefects, by the press ministry, and by Mussolini himself. The decisions of these actors and agencies was unpredictable, since they varied over time and often contradicted each other; hence authors generally assumed the worst, and engaged in more self-censorship than might have been necessary (Guido Bonsaver, “De la censure politique à l’autocensure historique: le cas de la littérature italienne sous le fascisme,” p. 255-256). That lowered the number of overt cases of censorship, and thereby allowed the fascists to claim that they ran a relatively tolerant regime. Other factors allow dictators to claim that their repressive actions are willed by the people. Authoritarian rulers often rely on the connivance of their subjects, all-too-many of whom are willing to denounce their fellow citizens to the authorities, whether in a subway in Cairo or among musicians in Zaire and Malawi (Franck Mermier, “La censure du livre dans l’espace arabe,” p. 327; Michael Drewett, “Rethinking Popular Music Censorship in Africa,” p. 333-334). Fear of such denunciation likewise produces extremes of self-censorship. Indeed, that is the terrible irony of censorship in brutal dictatorships: most censorship is self-censorship. Hence the leaders can officially deny that they engage in widespread repression —though everyone knows that the silence of their subjects is guaranteed by the severity of the punishments meted out to those few who dare to speak their minds.

The essays in this volume raise issues that should concern every citizen, as more and more liberal democracies become self-professed “illiberal” democracies. Even in the United States —historically the country with the most robust protection of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, as enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution— the coming years will be challenging.