

## Censorship : A Study of the Methods of Power and Surveillance

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### Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the change in the approach towards censorship from the traditional model of sovereign power to a more nuanced and dispersed view regarding the role of the censorship today. It attempts at a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of power and the various other forms of control through surveillance and normalization of behavior that creates disciplined selves in society. In the *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* Foucault traces a major shift in the penal practices from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century when the public torture of the body was replaced by a more effective form of discipline. This change in the conception of power and punishment categorizes the authority of censorship as not an external force but as a process of regulation internalized by every individual in society. A Foucauldian interpretation of the authority of censorship highlights the potential threat to the repression of reason and thought, but also considers the productive aspect of repression on the domain of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Censorship, Panopticon, Surveillance, Repression, Decentralization of Power, Transgression

What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist. Without the freedom to challenge, even satirise all orthodoxies, including religious orthodoxies, it ceases to exist. Language and the imagination cannot be imprisoned, or art will die, and with it, a little of what makes us human.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

The history of censorship in Europe dates back to the beginning of the culture itself. John Milton in *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England* (1644) traces the history of censorship that began with the laws

against atheism in ancient Greece to the pronouncement of persecutions by the Spanish inquisitions. The term ‘censor’ originated from the name given to the high ranking magistrates in ancient Rome referred to as ‘censors’ who were to maintain public decorum in society. In the Middle Ages the church was responsible for licensing immoral activities. However with the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the need for a structured form of censorship arose. Rousseau compared censorship with a ‘terrible art’ that caused ‘frightful disorders’, as it allowed for the proliferation of ideas including those that were dangerous for public order.

With the turn of the century censorship became more mechanized. However it was not until the seventeenth century that the justification of censorship began to be questioned. Towards the middle of the seventeenth century the Roman Catholic Church’s censorship of Galileo’s theories concerning the movement of the earth led to one of the earliest occasions when the system of censorship was challenged by Galileo himself with his remark “And yet it moves!”. A more vehement outburst was made by Milton who in his *Areopagitica* pleaded for the “Liberty of Unlicenc’d Printing”, in which he argued that book censorship “will be primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth, not only by the disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindering and cropping the discovery that might be further made in both religious and civil Wisdom.”

Intolerance, freedom of speech, expression and thought have always been subjects of debate and discussion. Over the ages various theories on censorship have emerged that facilitate the understanding of the inner mechanisms of the system. Helen Freshwater in her article *Towards a redefinition of censorship*, affirms a change in the reception of the structures that impose prohibitions and its effects upon the subject. The twenty first century witnessed an upsurge in the profusion of new conceptions regarding censorship. The traditional model assumed censorship to take place post-expression, after which the subject undergoes the effects of the intervention. But in recent theories censorship was no longer considered to be the imposition of an authority by an external body. Censorship derived a new identity as a decentralized form of power distributed amongst various agents in society.

In the twentieth century, the influential thinker and historian Michel Foucault provided an insight into different notions of power. Foucault foregrounds the “diverse, dispersed

and productive character” of censorship. He proposes the need to “escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions, and instead base our analysis of power on the study of techniques and tactics of domination”. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault recounts the penal system in the eighteenth century when the conception of guilt and trial was a public spectacle that has been replaced in the nineteenth century by a form of punishment directed towards the mind and the ‘soul’. The shift in the penal style focused more on the discipline of the body and the re-education of the mind rather than the infliction of pain and torture to create a state of self discipline among individuals in society. Foucault alludes to the hypothetical punitive structure of the ‘Panopticon’ derived from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, as a generalized model for a wide range of social institutions that thrive on its surveillance quality. The structure of the ‘Panopticon’ is emblematic of the disciplinary mechanisms of power. It stands for the concepts of observation, surveillance, monitoring and policing that induces fear in the subject, who then voluntarily chooses to condition his behavior. The overarching invisible monitoring executed through social institutions like schools, universities, hospitals, and administrative bureaucracies in the modern age; cultivate a particular form of disciplined self. The organized form of surveillance unleashed by these institutions enforce normative behavior and hinders the possibility of creating art that is liberated from the restraints of power.

Dispersion of power among various agents in society promote an internalization of norms to maintain state administered normativity. It is through the method of surveillance that ‘disciplinary power’ functions in modern society. Since power is ‘omnipresent’ it functions through its ability to penetrate the mind of the individual which then enables its sustenance within society. The tactic of surveillance is also exercised through the use of technology, CCTV cameras, or GPS services and even the internet. The external methods of coercion and control have now been replaced by the self inflicted constraints that compels individuals to succumb to the practice of creating binaries like ‘normal/abnormal’ and ‘sane/insane’.

In such repressive regimes a work of art bears testimony to the internal mental struggles experienced by a writer while setting down for the task of writing. When a writer attempts to transgress he has to challenge his own fabricated disciplined self along with the external forces in the outer world that reinforces the restrictive strictures on the individual. When a writer decides to challenge the norms; the ultimate truth that the writer strives to manifest forms a coded text that leaves behind a trail of drafts and

scribbles that record the pristine thought process of the writer before the published work. The vigilance in the conscious and unconscious mind of every individual is an outcome of the fear of being observed and punished if guilty. At times however knowledge that is repressed by the agents of power finds its identity in the act of repression itself which in turn leads to a proliferation of discourses concerning the forbidden subject.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault highlights the paradoxical effect that arises from the efforts to repress knowledge which in turn creates a new discourse around it. Foucault particularly refers to the subject of sexuality that was repressed in the nineteenth century but the attempts at repression produced an interest in the subject which led to the emergence of multiple discourses that analyzed the subject in detail. These discourses whether medicine, psychology, pedagogy and others conducted scientific studies and classified individuals as particular sexual beings. This categorization of individuals by the sciences through mechanisms of scrutiny and control was a maneuver by the state to produce disciplined selves that identify with the state manufactured identities.

In *A Preface to Transgression*, Foucault asserts the entrance of the term ‘sexuality’ into the vocabulary of the common masses emphasizing on its normality. Transgression according to Foucault is an act that derives its meaning from the ‘limit’ that is imposed upon it. The act of transgression needs to cross and re-cross the line that blocks its way to freedom. In fact both the limit and the transgression are inter dependent, as one cannot exist without the other. Foucault questions the authority of the limit, once it has been violated by an act of transgression. He states that the interaction between the two, glorifies that which is censored. Foucault defines transgression as “a flash of lighting in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation.” The role of transgression is not to win over the limit but to trace its origin.

In 2002, Antoon de Baets comments “censorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, undermine its own aims.” In the era of the internet and social media overt censorship can have a reverse effect. Attempts to ban, presumably controversial or harmful ideas creates a fervor and knowledge around the subject which ends up publicizing the very idea that it intends to forbid. The case of

Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* validates the counter effect of censorship. The world-wide fame received by the book post the ban, acted as a backlash. Despite persistent efforts made to annihilate the ideas professed in the book, the upsurge took a positive turn as the ban was reverted by a downpour of unauthorized publications and circulations. In February 1989 when the Fatwa was imposed upon Rushdie, the British and U.S Governments along with other human rights activists immediately came to his defense. The Western press worked on the case for years and even various renowned authors pleaded on behalf of Rushdie. The author had to fight multiple battles but the entire controversy brought him an unprecedented recognition. Such instances prove that censorship cannot always impose a ban on reason and intellect.

Foucault declares that ‘power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’. He considers power to be relative and productive. If the effects of power are only seen to be repressive or punitive one would never obey its dictates. Power becomes acceptable because it procures pleasure and produces knowledge and discourses. In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault had defined the word ‘repression’ as a method employed to achieve normativity in society. Later in an interview he admits that such a consideration of repression proves inadequate in capturing the productive potential of power. So Foucault makes a transition from causes of intolerance, to techniques of power that works through “tactical and positive interventions of surveillance, circulation, control ... that are linked with techniques that give the appearance of repression.”

Recent studies have focused upon the internal effects of power upon the individual and the notion of self-censorship. In the field of writing this form of censorship becomes a product of external censorship that makes a writer shape his thoughts in ways acceptable to the norms. Journalist Zamir Niazi calls ‘self-censorship’ the ‘prudent conformity and silence of complicity’ that leads to estrangement, alienation and loss of confidence in the individual as he contemplates whether to express his unregulated thoughts. Such form of censorship happens at the level of speech too when an individual conjectures the ramifications of his words and after much rumination produces only a percolated version of his original ideas.

The new direction that the word censorship received demanded an investigation of the structures of language itself. Pierre Bourdieu in *Language and Symbolic Power* states

that censorship is a ‘structural necessity’. It is impossible to escape from its clutches because it is ‘ubiquitous’ and ‘inevitable’. Bourdieu says “Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorized to say [...] he is [...] censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalized and which impose their form on all expressions.” When an individual uses a language he/she yields to the societal conception of the right and wrong. Linguistic interactions become a reproduction and reiteration of the socially generated acts of standard speech.

Literary theorist Stanley Fish forwards a similar idea in his work *There’s No Such Thing As Free Speech*, where the author considers the concept of free speech to be “abstract” because it is deprived of its “natural content” and imbued with artificial matter imposed externally. Stanley Fish defines ‘free speech’ as ‘preferred speech’ or ‘verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas that we wish to advance.’ It works through the cycle of inclusion and exclusion that takes place in the psyche. The assertion of a statement holds behind it a series of denials and prohibitions. Restriction is an articulation of the negation of alternative possibilities in a world governed by ideologies. The regulation of speech is conducted by an affirmation, with an exclusion lurking behind it. It functions as Fish states: ‘we are for this which means we are against that’ and it is only through this process that speech becomes meaningful. Freedom derives its meaning from the opposition that administers it. Fish brings down utterance or thought itself to the level of a construct that is confined by the binaries of right and wrong. Every form of speech uttered by an individual is part of the conduct rendered acceptable by the world. Hence free speech according to Fish is a ‘conceptual impossibility’ and a condition that is ‘unrealizable’ because no speech can be ‘free’ of the constraints of politics or ideology. The moment a person speaks he/she unknowingly participates in the public forum shaped by ideological restraints.

Helen Freshwater observes that even psychoanalysis invests in the notion of censorship as a ‘structural necessity’. The nineteenth century neurologist Sigmund Freud asserts that the process of ‘censorious exclusion and differentiation’ is imbued within our ‘basic instincts’. Our impulses are conditioned through the perception of ‘good’ while denouncing the ‘bad’. Freud claims that our statements are processed through a filtration of thoughts such as ‘I should like to eat this’ or ‘I should like to spit it out’ [...] that is to say: ‘It shall be inside me’ or ‘it shall be outside me’. Freud further complicates it through his assertion that our consciousness functions through a process of ‘repression’.

Our mind is bifurcated into two sections with one side sheltering the suppressed distressful thoughts. Freud believes that it is the process of repression that constitutes the self. His theory about the psyche maintains that the external force that brings about the repression is represented through the very act of repression that it instigates in the inner self of the individual.

Foucault and Freud substantiates the impossibility of turning the concept of 'free speech' into a reality. Foucault refers to the productive power of censorship that creates knowledge about the repressed subject, but he is also aware of the individual's loss of control over his body through the creation of a discourse on sexuality. A consideration of these notions of power make it extremely difficult to assess the acts of transgression or contestation. If repression is nothing but a strategic method deployed, to turn individuals into propagators of power, the means of evading censorship will seem impossible. Even when an individual decides to transgress, he needs to confront the limits set by himself which he has internalized through his interaction with society. The self experiences a tussle in the mind while attempting to express certain thoughts, feelings and experiences. Michael Levine in *Writing Through Repression : Literature, Censorship, Psychoanalysis* refers to the consciousness of the author regarding the possible consequences of his work. An author needs to combat censorship even prior to the publication of his work. The process of censoring that goes within his/her mind leads to the development of a stylistic technique in the text as the author strives to camouflage his/her provocative thoughts under the shield of irony, metaphors or satire.

Along with the production of a style of writing censorship also leads to the generation of a speculative audience, who take pleasure into investigating the implicit meaning of sentences. They expertise in finding meaning that lies hidden within a text. The introspective potential in the reader brings about the failure of censorship. At times even silence becomes a potent weapon that succeeds in subverting inexpugnable norms. However such deductions could also be denounced on account of their resort to presuppositions concerning the author or the reader. If we take a departure from the human rights' approach of freedom towards the Foucauldian position that considers censorship to be posited both within and without, we further complicate the question: Whether censorship fails or succeeds in its agenda to oppose reason?

A recourse to the psychoanalytic process shows that complete transgression or freedom cannot be achieved because of the societal codes of behavior internalized by us. In fact even our speech goes through the process of purification that makes it unnatural and mechanized, as it becomes part of a refined vocabulary. The fact that an author or speaker censors his/her thoughts or contemplates over the ramifications of his speech, authenticates the assertion that censorship constitutes our being. We do not have the choice to be inside or outside censorship. It monitors our actions and accordingly gives shape to our thoughts. So even when we think that we are using our rational faculties, we in a way are still conforming to power that gains an authority over us by the maintenance of fear exercised through methods of supervision and inspection.

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