

# Totalitarian and Post-totalitarian Censorship: From Hard to Soft?

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*This article deals with the relationships between totalitarian and post-totalitarian censorship, especially regarding the censorship of literary works. A general conceptual outline for discussing censorship is followed by an analysis of models and patterns of totalitarian – especially communist – censorship. The conclusion deals with some useful areas to consider with regard to post-totalitarian literary censorship, including economics (the capitalist book market), ethics (political correctness), and legislation.*

Keywords: literature and censorship / social systems / totalitarianism / post-totalitarianism

UDK 82:351.751.5  
82:316.7

Like every concept that is really worth considering, censorship evades an ultimate definition. It is actually radically *problematic*. Reducing it to a formal, institutional dimension that would merely encompass legal, political, and hierarchical aspects of the term seems inappropriate because this makes it impossible to account for the complex effects of totalitarian practices of censorship. It is therefore inevitable to include informal, implicit dimensions of censorship along with their reflections in *self-censorship*, but perhaps not to such a degree as to include the self-censorship of an internal, individual “quiet censor”, which seems to operate without clearly identifiable external threats.<sup>1</sup> Thus it seems more productive to connect censorship with a certain agent that does not have to be utterly concrete. It can adopt different kinds and degrees of institutionalization. Rulers and other influential interest groups have always tried to control the *circulation of ideas* in society and to restrict the influence of those that were potentially harmful to their interests. To do so, a variety of procedures have been developed through the centuries – from ancient and medieval indexes to monarchic and totalitarian censorships – that can be described by the term *censorship*.

Censorship as a knot that binds power and knowledge (Jansen) has recently been more or less successfully coupled with various theoretical concepts. Jonathon Green, author of the *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, con-

ceives of it as an unavoidable counterpart of communication in all periods that develops along with communication channels (Green xxii). Jan and Aleida Assman have shed light on the link between canon and censorship regarding the “stabilization” of interpretations of reality, which is the necessary basis for establishing any community. Three institutions of “tradition guarding” provide for such stabilization: (traditional) censorship, cultivation of text (Germ. *Textpflege*), and cultivation of meaning (Germ. *Sinnpflege*; Assman and Assman 11). The broader view of censorship definitely includes questions of how to manage interpretations and how to reshape and even appropriate cultural memory, by means of suppression if necessary.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the spirit of the motto “who controls the past controls the future”, totalitarian censorships as a rule have begun with reinterpretation, erasure, and suppression. Bearing all this in mind, it must also be considered that the question of censorship is always a question of a certain contest, a battle for defining the interiority of a given intervention. Hence if one wants to observe censorship on the appropriate sociological level, one has to distance oneself from both the perspective of the assumed “censor” and – perhaps with more difficulty – from the perspective of the assumed “censored”.

Before discussing the relationship between totalitarian and post-totalitarian censorship in more detail, it would be useful to outline some problems connected to historical modes of censorship. In general, censorship can be approached from different perspectives. One is *socio-political*, concerned with how a certain form of censorship functions in practice and how it is institutionalized, hierarchically structured, and so on. Another more specialized perspective is *textual*, concerned with focusing on the relationship between censored and censorial discourse, potential “displacements” in censorial discourse, and so on. At the socio-political level, censorship should not be reduced to its formal, bureaucratic dimension,<sup>3</sup> especially if we want to include all forms of regulation of the dissemination of ideas, ranging from the *brutal*, (i.e., the repressive apparatus of the judiciary, the police, and even the army) to *softer*, more sophisticated models (e.g., exclusions, listings of forbidden books or authors, and restriction of access for certain categories of readers).

It also makes sense to distinguish between *preliminary* (preventive) and *retroactive* (suspensive) censorship. Whereas preliminary censorship guarantees primary control of any publication, retroactive censorship takes place after the problematic work is published. If necessary, it seizes the work or prosecutes the author, or other similar actions. It seems slightly more complicated to distinguish between *explicit* and *implicit* forms of censorship. At the sociological level, explicit censorship would define the forbidden areas

relatively clearly and offer a transparent system of sanctions against violations, whereas implicit censorship would deliberately leave a wide range of openness and formal lack of articulation. Implicit censorship would therefore comprise an area that is not strictly codified legally, wherein no one can ever be sure whether the boundaries have been trespassed or not, or predict what kinds of penalties they might face. Such forms of censorship have radically marked communist and other totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, even when accompanied by formal, explicit forms of censorship. In their darkest emanations these forms of censorship represented a nightmare for whole societies, especially for their most creative individuals, who sometimes – fearing for their very existence – resorted to self-censorship, message encoding, and similar strategies.

The distinction between implicit and explicit can also be used productively at the textual level, such as when we analytically tackle texts belonging to the discourse of censorship in legal documents, moralistic argumentations, commentaries on lists of banned texts, and free speech manifestos that argue against censorship and the like. On the basis of rational backgrounds, it is possible to divide (explicit) argumentations of censorship in different ways.<sup>4</sup> However, this does not tell us a lot about how censorship achieves its aims. We know that 20th-century regimes that used censorship did not openly present themselves as violent supporters of enforced “unity”. A tendency to conceal interventions was characteristic of both Mussolini and the Russian and Yugoslav communists. We also know that, well before that time, ingenious censors developed specific *discursive manoeuvres*. Explicit interdiction, which simultaneously designates the forbidden content, is by definition ineffective, and therefore rare in practice. The implicitness of censorship at this level seems to have the ability to displace, bypass, and suppress content in a way that it only emerges on the surface as a “hallucination”, or else it does not even emerge at all.<sup>5</sup>

## **Mechanisms of totalitarian censorship**

I would like to propose that it is exactly the implicitness of totalitarian censorship that is the key to its *perversity*, on both a discursive and a socio-historical level. In the case of the latter, such implicit censorship, including the threats of ideologists, private calls to editors, and “friendly” chats, bypass text and hardly leaves verifiable traces. Paradoxically, its contours can only be guessed at from allusions in those (literary) texts that play the game of “censoring the censors”. Otherwise, these traces have to be supplemented by imagination, which only connects into coherent censorial

narratives the “hints, rumours, indirect proofs, and dubious witnesses that prefer to keep silent or ‘do not remember well’” (Jovičević, *Censorship* 241, see this collection).

This is why one has to agree with the Hungarian comparatist Peter Hajdu, who once commented that censorship in the Habsburg monarchy was a childish game compared to censorship in the later communist regime. “Monarchic” censorship, which followed the era in which the church dominated censorship, was predominantly formalized. In addition to repressive features it retained certain enlightened features, such as having the censor be an expert authority, and charging censorship with maintaining quality.<sup>6</sup> It was by no means “childish”. It was able to show its harsh, inexorable side when necessary. It did not however exceed the boundaries of explicit censorship, the kind that was ingeniously elaborated in works as early as Plato’s *Republic*. As in any kind of censorship, monarchic censorship also generated self-censorship. This self-censorship however, in contrast to the communist sort, did not include *paranoid* dimensions, such as those brilliantly described in the essay “Apologija samo-cenzure” (Apologia for Self-Censorship) by Drago Jančar.

Even a superficial analysis of totalitarian censorship therefore leads to an inevitable conclusion. The worst censorship practices were developed hand-in-hand with the most radical ideologies. This does not hold true only for communism or Nazism. The radical nature of revolutionary censorship in Iraq can be explained precisely by the difference between the ideological and pragmatic conceptions of power. If monarchic authorities predominantly considered censorship as a means of defending their position, the Baathists developed a dreadful regime of terror, a revision of cultural memory, and the persecution of any autonomous thought in accordance with their totalitarian national and religious ideology. So the alarm is to be sounded not only when censorship is connected with the desire to rule, or when it is a means of retaining power, but when its mission becomes the systematic breeding of “uniform” ideological consciousness, often based on manipulations of the past. In such cases, obsession with control and repression can lead in the final stage as far as attempts to censor behavioural patterns and lifestyles.<sup>7</sup>

This is why ascertaining that the patterns and levers of totalitarian censorships were strikingly similar should not come as any surprise at all. This was definitely the case for the cultures of the Eastern bloc in which the period from 1945 to 1990 – with only minor deviations – reveals almost identical interventions. The overture was the abolition of old newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, theatres, and associations, and the withdrawal of all “inappropriate” publications from the public sphere. This was followed by the establishment of new associations void of “undesirable” members

and monopolistic state-controlled publishing houses and theatres. Strict censorship was enforced, silencing the critical intellectuals under the threat of anathema, imprisonment, or even execution, and with total control over the exchange of information with the West. The ideology of socialist realism was enforced upon the arts. Stalinism, university purges, and ideological employment policies were enforced upon the humanities (Neubauer 36). The actions of the communist revolutionaries in Yugoslavia (i.e., Slovenia) were almost identical. They started with retroactive library and bookstore purges that removed all contestable material, especially scholarly, historical, and literary materials, from the public. The control over the influx of new books and ideas established immediately after the revolution, lasted – more or less disguised – until the fall of the regime. A typical rewriting of history followed, along with the ideological reform of the school curricula and the restoration of centralized control over newspapers, magazines, and publishers (Gabrič, *Slovenska; Socialistična*; Horvat).

Maybe there are some emphases to be added to Neubauer's observations on communist censorship in Eastern and Central Europe. The rulers not only "trained" the intellectuals through the use of repression, but also through rewarding them for obedience. They strove to master them with a refined dialectical method using a "carrot and stick" approach (Kos). Censorship, prosecutions, and imprisonments were the "stick," whereas the "carrot" was made up of numerous advantages that those loyal to the regime could expect in the distribution of cultural power. The faithful, or at least pragmatic, intellectuals occupied the editorial positions in the media and the publishing houses, chaired various associations and commissions, and contributed to the creation of cultural and subsidy policies. They were able to publish works in large print runs, were awarded national awards, and received sinecures in science or politics. All of this was possible not only because the hand of ideological control reached throughout the whole society, but also because the *state-intervention* market system was established in all areas (Dović; Kovač).

The Yugoslav case seems specific because of a particular detail. Official censorship – if we leave out the various manifestations of "indexing" and D-reserves – no longer existed after abolition of the "agitprop" institution in 1952. In this way, the Yugoslav oligarchy managed to create the image of freedom and lack of censorship, a supposedly "positive" example. It was only later that it turned out that the nonexistence of official censorship did not really contribute to diminishing the overall atmosphere of radical control. The same can be concluded from the Czech experience. In the early 1950s, the communists physically destroyed almost 30 million books. They introduced harsh preliminary censorship in 1953 that

was controlled directly by the top party officials and the secret police. In the 1960s control was loosened, and censorship came under the jurisdiction of normal state institutions. It became almost nonexistent on the eve of the Prague Spring in 1968. After ruthless suppression of the uprising, formal censorship was not renewed, but the time was ripe for extremely harsh and efficient self-censorship (Čulík 98–99). Both cases demonstrate quite clearly that the essential features of totalitarian censorship cannot be found at the formal, explicit level. On the contrary, the more the mechanisms appear to be *softened*, the harder are their effects.

## **Totalitarian censorship and literature**

The history of censorship shows that different kinds of works, varying from the religious (e.g., the Koran, the Bible, and heretical or apocryphal writings) and the philosophical to the scientific (e.g., Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo, and Darwin) and the literary, were subjected to censorship in different societies. A survey of merely the physical destruction of books – and its best exemplar, public book burning<sup>8</sup> – seems to be an almost impossible task. No less impressive would be a list of various prohibitive indexes, starting with the Catholic *Index librorum prohibitorum*, which confined the horizons of reception in the Occident for centuries.<sup>9</sup> Numerous masterpieces in the canon of world literature have been censored or mutilated at some time. Their authors have been prosecuted, or they have been placed on lists of prohibited literature, usually for moral or political reasons.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, one could not say that censors would distinguish *in principle* between the censorship of literary and non-literary materials. Nevertheless, literary works were obviously their most frequent and favourite target, in spite of the fact that literature (at least from the Pre-Romantic era) was developing an aura of artistic autonomy, and in spite of the fact that the theoretical discourse was simultaneously producing various arguments about the special structure, function, and autonomous laws of art. One of the most important arguments was the elaboration of complex oppositions between “reality” and “fiction”. The autonomous literary systems that developed in modern Europe actually created a unique space for the articulation of fundamental dilemmas in society. Many examples show that engagement in literature opened up new opportunities for creative expression of special insights that often conflicted with the prevailing ideologies and social norms.

This special role of literature was even more visible in totalitarian societies, where dissident literature functioned as the scene of the most decisive ethical reflections. It was able to cope with censorship by using

various evasive strategies such as complex metaphors, mythic or pseudo-historic detours, allusions, and so forth. It may sound slightly cynical, but obviously in a certain way literature *benefited* from censorship, which not only sharpened its socio-critical ear but also expanded its ability to express more general existential dilemmas.<sup>11</sup> It is possible to infer from the incredible intellectual investment they were ready to invest in the hide-and-seek games of censorship that fear of the rulers was close to panic. Their belief in the special role, mission, and “truth” of literature paradoxically linked the persecutors with the persecuted. In the situation of a “book cult”, the subversive potential ascribed to literature is not surprising. Inasmuch as it turned out to be productive for literature, from the current perspective there is no doubt that it was also advantageous for the dissident writers.<sup>12</sup> We should by no means diminish the heroic dimension of rebellion. Dissidents could not know for sure if or when the regime would crumble, and they never really knew what kind of risk they were taking. Was it having their works banned, anathema, imprisonment, or even a threat to their very existence? However, this is precisely the reason they managed to accumulate outstanding amounts of symbolic capital. They often became the leaders of national opinion, public figures with great authority. Under democracy they were able to merge their acquired capital into leading positions in culture or politics.

However, it soon turned out that the changes that writers had previously defended most loudly – democracy, pluralism, free speech, and a free press – also brought some unexpected consequences. Among them was a radical change in the position of literature. Suddenly, the writer’s problem was no longer what to write, but how to deliver this writing to the audience in the midst of a flood of all kinds of media banalities. Many of the “fathers of the nation” that fought for democracy were disheartened and disappointed in the new situation. As the Ukrainian writer Andrei Kurkov remembers, in the times of Soviet censorship literature circulated underground, illegally, with a scent of exclusivity, saying, “Anything showing literary courage was in demand, a demand born of the censor’s own efforts” (Kurkov 50). After Ukraine became independent in 1991 the black market died out. It was possible to publish anything, but literature had lost the aura it previously had.

Writers had to cope with the fact that anti-communism, aestheticism, and similar orientations simply did not enable them to remain on the scene and make a decent living. More serious opportunities opened up in politics and journalism with the new distribution of social power. Otherwise, writers were forced to resort to trivial literature, or selling stories about life under communism to Western readers (Wachtel). They had entered

the world their Western peers had been living in for a long time already; a world in which the only relevant question became whether or not one was able to sell the texts he wrote. The new situation, which was far from impressive, also turned the traditional role of literary censorship upside down. After the end of the cold war censorship became less obvious, if China and the so-called “rogue” states are not included here. The general impression was that, at least from the perspective of the literary domain, censorship had been ultimately expelled. As Štikš states, “The circulation of ideas appears to be left to the merciless market and the readers’ presumed ‘freedom of choice’” (Štikš 80). Political groups – except very indirectly through financial support – do not censor book production, and publishers claim they are apolitical. Has censorship really vanished, or might this apparent absence actually be the most malicious censor’s trick?

### **Evasive post-totalitarian censorship**

A certain degree of scepticism remains justified. Even if the hub of discussion has moved from literature to the media, censorship is still subject to lively debate.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the contestability of censorship, or the battle to define its boundaries, is even sharper in democracies. The situation is far from being transparent, and much depends upon how the field of communication is defined. Who will delimit interiority/exteriority and succeed in presenting his position as something “common”? No one is prepared to admit to being a censor, and the subject of fear seems more evasive than ever. Analyzing all of the areas where post-totalitarian censorship may be found seems a difficult task even if we limit ourselves only to literature. This is why we can only point to some promising areas. They not only share the intensified question of internality. Even if their censorial nature fades and softens, interventions might still be understood as some form of regulation, but they are so distant from those usually denominated as censorship that the usage of this term becomes questionable.

The machinery of the *capitalist book market* that ruthlessly tailors book production and reception is to be mentioned among the first. It is impossible to participate in the circulation of ideas without breaking a certain economic threshold and becoming a part of the capitalist exchange of goods. “Censorship” here would then be more within the economic than the ideological category.<sup>14</sup> Another broad area seems to be *ethics*. Here I would stress the concept of political correctness and its derivatives (protection of marginal groups, guarding liberalism’s taboos), the claims to limit the freedom of expression in the name of such values, and the more

or less masked forms of explicit censorship for certain groups of readers, in particular young people, which are supposed to protect them from certain contents such as obscenity. The third such domain is *legislation*. It is possible to find many problems at this level (in the areas of freedom of speech and expression, freedom of the media, the right of the public to be informed, the rights of individuals, of animals, etc.) that through legislation can lead to “regulative” effects. From the point of view of literature, the clash of two constitutionally guaranteed rights: the right to freedom of expression and artistic creation and the right to retain one’s good name, or not to be defamed (Posner), seems to be particularly vexing.

To illustrate the complexity of the major contemporary conflicts concerning censorship, – and this complexity is not only bound to the area of legislation – we can quickly analyze in conclusion how this philosophical and legal conflict is understood by two Slovenian writers that have found themselves caught in the judicial machinery (see their contributions in this collection). Pikalo takes for granted both freedom of speech and the total separation of fiction from other texts. He therefore concludes “They treated my literary work as if it were a chronicle, and not fiction. In short, they denied me the autonomy of my literature and my freedom to create” (Pikalo 310). He thinks that the accuser should have to prove malevolence, and righteously warns of the danger of writers’ self-censoring if this case became a precedent. He believes that censorship in democracy is worse than in the last decade of communism, during which only “verbal threats” were used, whereas in the 1990s “verbal expression” itself was under threat, because censorship hit the writer in his pocketbook. Up to this point, Pikalo’s views are admissible to the debate, but personal involvement seems to lead him to a crucial mistake when he says “In short, censorship is more sophisticated now, even though its purpose is the same, to frighten and punish free-thinking authors and intellectuals in a society that considers itself democratic” (310).

In fact, the conflict in which Pikalo has found himself far exceeds the level of a conflict between an identifiable ideological agent and the free-thinking intellectual that he punishes. The gap between systemic, planned totalitarian repression and post-modern legislation, which regulates potential impacts on individuals, is deep and essential, even if the two use a similar repressive apparatus, and this similarity obviously leads to hasty conclusions. From this perspective, Smolnikar’s reflections turn out to be more productive. They offer an excursion into the microcosm of the artist, opening up a view into her intimate workshop and revealing the meandering ways that she creates multifaceted literary figures. Her thoughts can be understood as an intimate encounter with the wounds inflicted by the

*hermeneutic primitivism* of the judiciary machine, the accusers and witnesses. It is quite easy to confirm that this is not an exaggerated estimation when one reads the trial transcripts.<sup>15</sup>

In both of these Slovenian cases the worn-out catchword, or the simple argument that the literary work is *just an invention* and that the judges *just don't understand*, has justifiably proved to be insufficient. The defence of literary autonomy calls for a far more complex analysis of the relationships between fiction and reality, and a production of persuasive theoretical arguments that will prove effective in the future, when new relationships between law, literature, and censorship are established.<sup>16</sup> We may be sure that as the censorship mechanisms in contemporary society become more complex, their explanations will also have to become more complex, if they are to remain convincing and useful. Literature itself, however, will have to prove again and again in this new situation that it is able to relevantly *expand* its space, which in the information society may be narrowing dangerously, in spite of the chaotic flood of voices.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In its broadest sense, self-censorship can be understood as an inner tension regarding what *might be* written down. Here we will ignore its most general motives (on the levels of psychology, language, cultural memory etc.).

<sup>2</sup> See Löwenthal, *Calibans Erbe*, and Paterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the preliminary licensing to publish certain texts typical of “pre-March” censorship in the Habsburg monarchy.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to *moral* (ethically problematic or “obscene” works) and *political* (interests of the state, the army, and “political correctness”), the *corporate* backgrounds are becoming increasingly interesting today (filtering media contents; e.g., leaving out unflattering information about advertisers).

<sup>5</sup> See Packard's contribution in this collection.

<sup>6</sup> This dimension is reflected in the Habsburg instructions requiring strictness regarding works that repeat what is already known and tolerance regarding innovative ones. The censor not only acted as a watchdog of the regime and the social order, but also kept an eye on quality and relevance (Kranjc).

<sup>7</sup> In this dimension fundamentalist regimes, such as that in Iran, by far surpass communist ones.

<sup>8</sup> Here is a (very incomplete) selection, just to “get a whiff” of the dimensions of book-burning: Chinese philosophical books (2nd-century China, Emperor Qin Shi Huang); Christian books (4th-century Rome, Emperor Diocletian); Ovid's poetry and *Decameron* (15th-century Florence, Savonarola); sacred books of the Maya (16th-century Yucatan, Spaniards), Protestant works (16th-century Europe, Catholics); royalist and religious works (1793, France, Robespierre); Cankar's collection of poetry *Erotika* (1899 Slovenia, Bishop Jeglič); anticommunist, czarist, and nationalistic works (Russian communists after 1917); Jewish and other “degenerate” works (Nazi period, Germany). The Nazis included the works of Marx, Remarque, and Heine – who, ironically, a hundred years before had pre-

dicted that “Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen” (Where they have burned books, they will end up burning people). Even in the second half of the 20th century book burning was possible, both official (libraries, influenced by McCarthy in the US, Pinochet in Chile, etc.) and unofficial (interest groups; authors such as Salman Rushdie or the Harry Potter books).

<sup>9</sup> The first edition of *Index librorum prohibitorum* was printed in the 16th century, first at the congregation of the inquisition, and later at the special congregation concerned with the index. Until 1966, when the index was abolished, it included practically all important modern philosophers and numerous writers. This indexing significantly restricted the reach and availability of their works and ideas.

<sup>10</sup> Certain forms of moral-ideological censorship were levied against Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (around 1400), Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), and many other less famous works. For social and political reasons Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and literature in communist countries (the works of Solzhenitsyn or Pasternak) were censored.

<sup>11</sup> In Slovenian drama, the best plays by Kozak, Strniša, or Jančar are never completely reducible to the totalitarian context, even if they refer to it very often.

<sup>12</sup> The most famous Eastern European dissident writers are Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Czesław Miłosz, Stanisław Lem and György Konrád. The dissident position was constitutive for Slovenian writers as well, from Kocbek’s anathema and Zupan’s and Torkar’s imprisonments to the circles associated with *Nova revija* and other periodicals in the 1980s (cf. Dovič; Kos; Gabrič, “Edvard”; Inkret).

<sup>13</sup> See the discussions of media censorship in Slovenia (Vezjak) and media censorship under Berlusconi (Abruzzese).

<sup>14</sup> So we don’t necessarily have to believe a contemporary writer that claims to have been censored? Or do we, actually?

<sup>15</sup> During the trial, Smolinkar tried to demonstrate her creative process and to promote Marko Juvan’s scholarly perspective, but with little success.

<sup>16</sup> From older ideas of quasi-reality (Ingarden) to more recent concepts such as trans-world identities, fictional operators, or poly-referentiality (Juvan).

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