



HAL
open science

Comparing old and new censorships. A historical approach to "cancel culture"

Sandro Landi

► To cite this version:

Sandro Landi. Comparing old and new censorships. A historical approach to "cancel culture". Giuseppe Carrara et Laura Neri. Con i buoni sentimenti si fanno brutti libri? Etiche, estetiche e problemi della rappresentazione, Ledizioni, pp.55-65, 2022, 978-88-5526-925-4. <10.4000/books.ledizioni.14878>. <hal-05530723>

HAL Id: hal-05530723

<https://hal.science/hal-05530723v1>

Submitted on 11 Mar 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 - Attribution - International License

*Comparing old and new censorships
A historical approach to “cancel culture”*

Sandro Landi

1. Persistence of censorship

At this moment, in time while I am presenting these notes, an unspecified but significant number of people are victims of censorship. In order to become aware of this, one need only consult *Index of Censorship*, a magazine established half a century ago in London by the poet Stephen Spender, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, David Astor, later editor of the *Observer*, and the writer and expert on the Soviet Union Edward Crankshaw¹. Founded as a tangible form of solidarity with Soviet dissidents, the *Index of censorship* has become over time a global platform used by persecuted people to tell their stories and by journalists worldwide to denounce regimes that do not respect Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

The magazine's very rich and up-to-date website is one of the most important observatories of the various areas in which the right to freedom of expression is currently under threat. *Index of censorship* identifies four such fields of interest: “academic freedom”, “artistic freedom”, “digital freedom”, “media freedom”. In each of these four broad areas, the dominant type of complaint concerns violations at the hands of states: academics deprived of their position in Turkey, writers or theatre actors under control in China, journalists silenced in Russia, etc. The forum on freedom of expression on the web is particularly useful: «Index campaigns against restrictions on free speech online, including the growing use and abuse of national security legislation to silence government criticism.» An interactive map allows, in particular, one to survey the various restrictions that occurred during the pandemic period because “in times of extraordinary crisis, governments often take the opportunity to roll back on personal freedoms and media freedom [...]. Index has tracked this history, and has many examples published in our archive which covers the years 1972 to today».

¹ <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/>

For an activist association formed at the height of the Cold War, this censorship, i.e. censorship emanating from public apparatuses, still remains the main target. In fact, there is a long chronology of this censorship, which is heir to that practiced by states and churches in the early modern age. If we adopt the teleological vision inscribed in the great constitutional texts of the late eighteenth century (Article 11 of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, 1789, and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, 1791), a conspicuous part of the globe still awaits access to the realm of freedom of expression. The other part - the part of the Western world that has produced and adopted these texts as legal and political practice - is instead subject to periodic and disturbing returns to the past. According to Robert Darnton, historian of censorship in eighteenth-century France, the invariable tendency of states (including democratic states) is to interfere in intellectual production; in the digital age, this tendency tends to worsen: «If states exercised this power in the age of print, who will prevent them from abusing it in the age of the Internet?».² As is evident from this quotation, this past that does not move ahead, this censorship that returns with different instruments but with similar aims, lends itself well to an exercise in historical comparatism. I will return to this point.

I would like for a moment to return to *Index of Censorship* and their up-to-date observatory on different forms of censorship and pose a first question: individuals who have experienced the subversive character of literature by demonstrating for the rights of Soviet dissidents may still - unfortunately - feel comfortable in the world in which we live. However, how will these same individuals react when confronted with forms of restriction of freedom of expression that affect democratic societies, emanating not from public powers but from progressive activist groups?

The question implies an anthropological dimension, because the gap that has developed in recent years between old and new forms of censorship is an unprecedented historical fact. Our generation is the first to be able to witness this mutation, and the *Index of Censorship* website does indeed report on it, especially in the areas of academic freedom and artistic freedom. Regarding the former, «*Index* is currently studying the impact of restrictions on free speech on students and academics in universities in the UK and US»? Concerning the latter, «case studies involve works of art that deal with some of the most sensitive, controversial and complex issues in society today - terrorism, incest, slavery, illegal immigration, grooming, radicalization - causing debate and controversy over the authorship and representation of these works. In some cases the works have been removed, in others not - in some the controversy has been brought forward, in others not».

I would like to point out that in these notes I will essentially focus on these new forms of limitation of freedom of expression. If I have decided here, at a meeting of compar-

² R. Darnton, *De la censure. Essai d'histoire comparée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014, p. 20.

artists, to propose an exercise in comparison, it is because all historians of censorship, generally ready to establish (sometimes questionable) parallels with the past, are silent in the face of this phenomenon. How to justify this silence? Undoubtedly, historians are not comfortable with issues of urgent topicality. That is why, in this case, it is mostly philosophers and journalists who speak out. However, the main cause of this silence is perhaps of a conceptual nature. Scholars in the habit of thinking of censorship as a repressive activity of public apparatuses are ill-equipped to make sense of censorship that comes from below: a form of censorship, apparently, with no equivalent in the past.

Does it make sense to compare, in this case, present and past? Marc Bloch is one of the historians who has most insisted on the heuristic significance of comparison. In a magnificent essay on the virality of *fake news* (“fausses nouvelles”) in the trenches of the First World War (1922)³, Bloch argues that the emerging and apparently unprecedented forms of the present constitute an extraordinary laboratory available to the historian to interrogate the past and the categories with which we interpret it. That is what I will attempt to do here: to start from the present to discuss the archaic notion of censorship and its possible manifestations in the present time.

2. *The new censorships*

What is meant by “new censorships”? How can a typology be established? The first difficulty the historian faces is to define with certainty his object. For this reason, I propose to start from a recent document, the report entitled *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*, presented to the British Parliament in February 2021 by the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson. To my knowledge this is the only official text that attempts to define this object. The text speaks of a “creeping culture of censorship” that is spreading across British campuses:

The rise of intolerance and ‘cancel culture’ upon our campuses is one that directly affects individuals and their livelihoods. Students have been expelled from their courses, academics fired and others who have been forced to live under the threat of violence. These high profile incidents are but the tip of the iceberg. For every Ngole, Carl or Todd whose story is known, evidence suggests *there are many more who have felt they had to keep silent*, withheld research or believe they have faced active discrimination in appointment or promotion because of views they have expressed. Though there are noble exceptions, often a blind eye has been turned to the *creeping culture of censorship*.⁴

³ M. Bloch, *Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre*, Allia, Paris 2007 (1922).

⁴ *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*, February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-free-speech-and-academic-freedom>.

Felix Ngole, a student expelled in 2015 from the University of Sheffield for stating that homosexuality is a sin; Noah Carl, a sociologist at the University of Cambridge fired for his controversial ideas on eugenics and immigration; Selina Todd, a historian at the University of Oxford, whose talk at the Oxford International Women's Festival was cancelled under pressure from trans activists. According to the Williamson report, therefore, three emblematic cases of a phenomenon that is becoming generalised. It is sufficient to consult the site *Canceled people*, an impressive database that files, every day, cases of academics, writers, artists "canceled" that is forced to silence because of their opinions.⁵ The Williamson report therefore identifies an emerging form of censorship in the so-called "cancel culture".

"Cancel culture" is a variant of the so-called "call-out culture" ("publicly naming"), a term used since 2014 by the #MeToo movement. According to the Oxford dictionary "Cancel culture" is "the practice of excluding somebody from social or professional life by refusing to communicate with them online or in real life, because they have said or done something that other people do not agree with"⁶. "Cancel culture", in essence, as an active and collective form of boycott or ostracism against individuals and ideas. What are its distinctive features?

1. It is a phenomenon that manifests itself mainly in the network, therefore linked to the specific quality of discourse and exchanges that the network makes possible (anonymity, de-empowerment and liberation of speech)
2. A phenomenon linked to the claim of emancipation of minorities (gender, ethnicity).
3. Although it often takes the form of highly mediatised sanctions in the form of reprimands, the "Cancel culture" is essentially preventive: it originates from the need to create "*safe spaces*" on campuses in which minorities can protect themselves from potentially traumatic narratives and images⁷. The widespread practice of trigger warnings on American and British campuses is aimed at preventing these kinds of disturbing effects⁸. The cancel culture is also preventive because it aims at excluding *a priori* from the field of debate conflicting positions, i.e. as a reasoned refusal to

⁵ <https://www.canceledpeople.com/>

⁶ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cancel-culture>

⁷ A. E. Berger, *Topolitique du safe space*, «Transitions», 15, 2019, <https://www.mouvement-transitions.fr/index.php/hospitalites/republications-traductions-inédits/n-15-a-e-berger-topolitique-du-safe-space>; G. Lukianoff, J. Haid, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, London, Penguin Books, 2018.

⁸ H. Merlin-Kajman, *Enseigner avec civilité ? Trigger warning et problèmes de partage de la littérature*, «Littéralité», 4, 2018, <https://www.mouvement-transitions.fr/index.php/lit->

argue (unworthiness of the interlocutor’s positions or scientific irrelevance).

4. Although always *ad personam*, the cancel culture is essentially directed against a certain narrative. It is, in essence, a “hermeneutic control” imposed on both representations and language. There are various manifestations of this: the removal of paintings deemed impudent; boycotts of conferences, courses, a particular book or author; vandalism of statuary as an expression of a criminalized past.

Hence the extraordinary metamorphosis that the perception of literature has undergone in recent years in democratic societies. In essence: an almost consensual discourse had made of literature, until recently, a space of freedom or repair of individual or collective traumas. In the course of the last decades (it would be necessary to establish a chronology) literature has been the object of a process of gradual disenchantment⁹. From being a space of freedom par excellence, literature has become, in the eyes of some, an accomplice to long-standing historical oppression. Note that “hermeneutic control” implies a deliberate and political use of anachronism: by attributing to the reader an exorbitant role in the creation of meaning, the cancel culture presents itself as a philological alternative to a purely erudite historicism deemed heir to historical injustices. The impacts of this actualizing hermeneutic remain to be assessed. Among those immediately visible, for example, the British Library has created an initial list of 300 authors whose work is linked to slavery or colonialism (*Evidence of connections to slavery, profits from slavery or from colonialism*), including contemporary poet Ted Hughes, on the basis that an ancestor born in 1592, Nicholas Ferrar, had ties to the London Virginia Company.¹⁰

One final aspect deserves attention in this attempt of synthesis. The term “censorship” used to describe this phenomenon is not unanimous among scholars. I cite the case of Didier Fassin, a sociologist at EHESS, who in an online article published in May 2021 (“Cancel culture, l’importation d’une polémique”)¹¹, argues:

- a. That the current controversy over the CC is instrumental, imported from the United States and that it essentially reproduces that against ‘political correctness’ conducted by right-wing intellectuals in the 1980s.
- b. That CC is an infamous term used by these same intellectuals to disqualify the legitimate claims of active minorities.

terarite/articles/sommaire-general-de-articles/1535-n-4-h-merlin-kajman-enseigner-avec-civilite-trigger-warning-et-problemes-de-partage-de-la-litterature.

⁹ M. Hersant, *De la littérature considérée comme dispositif d’oppression*, «Cités», 86, 2021, p. 115-125.

¹⁰ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/major-named-collections-of-printed-books-now-in-the-british-library>.

¹¹ <http://publictionnaire.huma-num.fr/notice/cancel-culture-limportation-dune-polemique/>.

c. «The term censorship is misleading: to prohibit, one must have the power to prohibit» («Le terme de censure est trompeur : pour interdire, il faut avoir le pouvoir d'interdire»).

From a historical and philological point of view, Fassin is right: in fact, only those who hold power can censor. In the *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Emile Benveniste traces the history of the words *ensor* and *ensura*. *ensor* is inextricably linked to *auctoritas*.¹² According to Benveniste, to censor means «to assert with authority as if it were the truth, to say what is in conformity with the nature of things, to enunciate the norm of conduct», «to situate a man, an act, an opinion, with all the consequences that this public judgment entails (praise or blame)». «To censure, one needs the necessary authority; *quid censet?* That was the question ritually put to kings and senators». From Fassin's point of view, then, the cancel culture is not censorship because *auctoritas* is always on the side of the state or elites who therefore, by definition, have a monopoly on censorship¹³. How can we call censorship a censorship that comes from the bottom of society, not from the majority, but from minorities who are victims of discrimination? It is on this last point that I would like to focus my attention, trying to clarify, through an exercise of comparison, whether the phenomenon defined as cancel culture, is a possible historical manifestation of censorship.

3. Old and new censorships

Public/Private

The first point that makes a comparison possible is the public/private opposition. As seen in the definition proposed by Benveniste, censorship, from its origins in archaic Rome, is the expression of a public power. In the course of the modern age (from the middle of the 16th century) and up to the French revolution, this power, in almost all European countries, underwent a split: to publish a book a double authorization was needed, from the state authority and from the ecclesiastical one¹⁴. Differently, in the case of the cancel culture, the authority that appropriates the right to exclude a text or an author from the public sphere is, extraneous and, in many cases, explicitly opposed to the institutions of the state.

¹² E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2, *Pouvoir; droit, religion*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, p. 143-151.

¹³ The same idea can be found in a pamphlet by L. Murat, *Qui annule quoi?*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2022: «l'Etat seul annule car lui seul détient le pouvoir de censure et de contrôle, celui qui décide par exemple de suspendre les films ou frapper d'interdiction au moins de 18 ans ».

¹⁴ S. Landi, *Stampa, censura, opinione pubblica in età moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011, p. 71-98.

This is a historically, unprecedented configuration that finds, at first, an explanation in the status of North American universities, traditionally much more independent of the state than European universities. American universities are private spaces, partially free, if not from the law of the country, at least from its contingent governments, a derogation that is the condition for the exercise of “academic freedom” and therefore of critical thought. It is within this context - made possible by the First Amendment declaring the neutrality of the state with respect to beliefs and opinions - that “private censorship”, a true historical oxymoron, could emerge and then spread to the rest of Western societies.

The recurrent accusation levelled at the state, by militant associations, is that of being a “censor state”; however, everywhere in the West, we see a decline of the censorial functions as a prerogative of the state. The state is now incapable of exercising this attribute of sovereignty: for example, in the case of conspiracy theories, very frequent on the net, the state can do nothing but delegate the censorship function to private groups (twitter, facebook). Basically, to quote Benveniste, within the current context, the state no longer seems to be able to “authoritatively assert as if it were the truth, to say what is in conformity with the nature of things”; this task falls to other, emerging actors in the private sphere.

Morals/Emotions

Censorship in modern Europe was a device for selecting public discourse based on a value system. In late eighteenth-century France, for example, the censorship system operated on the basis of three main interdictions: God, the king, and customs¹⁵. Censorship invited authors and publishers to publish with circumspection. Its importance lay not so much in the actual scope of its controlling action, which was highly unlikely, as in the affirmation of the unity of these principles by a sovereign authority.¹⁶ In a chronologically distant but comparable context, East Germany, censorship, more or less efficient, was nonetheless the expression of a value system that might not be shared but that no one could ignore.¹⁷

The new forms of censorship are based instead on a prioritisation of ‘emotions’. Gavin Williamson sums up: «When I was younger, there was widespread agreement that the UK had done the right thing by offering asylum to Salman Rushdie after he became the subject of a fatwa for publishing *The Satanic Verses*. It was a sign of our free and liberal society. Attempts to ban *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or *Monty*

¹⁵ D. Roche, *Les républicains des lettres. Gens de culture et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, p. 29-46.

¹⁶ See E. Tortarolo, *The Invention of Free Press. Writers and Censorship in Eighteenth Century Europe*, New York, Springer, 2016, p. 51-95.

¹⁷ Darnton, *De la censure*, cit., p. 179-288.

Python's *Life of Brian* were similarly seen as an embarrassment that thankfully passed. While people may have disagreed and protested, there was no such thing as not being offended. That consensus is now being challenged. There are some in our society who prioritize "emotional safety" over free speech, or who equate speech with violence».¹⁸

The priority given to the right to be protected from traumatic aggression of a text or image has in essence become a criterion for the selection of texts or images present in public space. While the principle on which this selection is based is clear, its applicability is clearly impossible to define once and for all because no object can, a priori, be excluded from it.

Minority/Majority

In the early modern Europe, censorship was the expression of a value system preserved by a minority but tacitly shared by a majority of individuals. This minority was made up of intellectuals. The recruitment of censors - as much in Bourbon France as in the Roman Inquisition - took place in the university world and included individuals of clear fame¹⁹. Censors and authors shared the same world, the same values, the same tacit rules. This is why censorship in the early modern Europe was never, as we tend to believe, absolute, but eminently negotiated.

The new forms of selection of public discourse are also the expression of a minority, or rather of differently identified minorities (in terms of gender, ethnicity); all of them have in common the principle of legitimate reparation for a wrong suffered in the present and in the course of history. Works or images are withdrawn from the public sphere in the name of a principle of reparation. Trauma is therefore the constitutive element of the minority, which is in fact configured as a community endowed with particular rights that demand universal recognition. Something very similar to what in the Old Regime was called a "state"²⁰. The right of selection and exclusion from the public space that the minority exercises cannot be negotiated but only legitimately granted. The cancel culture is never negotiated but unilateral and absolute. However, once again, taking up Fassin's question, can we really speak of censorship when minorities or "counter-public minorities" assert, against the state and against the elites, their right to exist in public space?

¹⁸ *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*, cit.

¹⁹ See A. Prospero, *La Chiesa e la circolazione della cultura nell'Italia della Controriforma. Effetti imprevisti della censura*, in U. Rozzo (a cura di), *La censura libraria nell'Europa del secolo XVI*, Udine, Forum, 147-161 and M. Cavarzere, *La prassi della censura nell'Italia del Seicento. Tra repressione e mediazione*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011.

²⁰ Merlin-Kajman, *Enseigner avec civilité ?*, cit.

4. “It is an evil thing to talk evilly of evil doing”

I would like, in conclusion, to take a further step back and dwell on a text by Machiavelli. In fact, although little considered by critics, Machiavelli develops a reflection on censorship. In the *Discourses on the first ten books of Titus Livy* (I, 49) Machiavelli praises the censors “arbiters of Roman customs”²¹ and, in the *Florentine Histories* (V, 1), he praises Cato for preventing the corruption of Roman youth by forbidding Greek philosophers to speak publicly²². The familiarity that Machiavelli shows with this object is not accidental. In the early sixteenth century, censorship, as a device for regulating the customs of the republic, is one of the subjects of Marcello Adriani’s reflections, Machiavelli’s hierarchical superior²³. Machiavelli is historically situated in the phase, prior to the great religious divisions of the mid-sixteenth century, in which censorship was not yet the expression of strong centralized powers. For this reason, Machiavelli is paradoxically closer to us who live in a context of decline and delegation of the sovereign attributes of the state, among which, precisely, censorship.

Among the manifestations of censorship that Machiavelli observes, there is also the phenomenon of self-censorship. Machiavelli speaks about it in the first chapter of the third book of the *Discourses*.²⁴ *The object of his analysis here is Christianity, a religion which, having strayed from its founding principles, was almost on the point of disappearing in the 13th century.* However, fortunately, says Machiavelli, two extraordinary personages, St Francis and St Dominic, “by their poverty and by their exemplification of the life of Christ, revived religion in the minds of men in whom it was already dead”. The result of this restoration is, however, apparently paradoxical:

And so powerful were their new orders, that they prevented the depravity of the prelates and religious heads from bringing ruin of religion. They also lived so frugally and had such prestige with the people as confessor and preachers that they convinced them *it is an evil thing to talk evilly of evil doing*, and a good thing to live under the obedience to such prelates, and that, if they did wrong, it must be left to God to chastise them. And, this being so, the latter behave as badly as they can, because they

²¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on the first ten books of Titus Livy*, edited by B. Crick, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 230.

²² Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, edited by L. B. Banfield and H.C. Mansfield, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 185.

²³ P. Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 160-161; S. Landi, *Lo sguardo di Machiavelli. Una nuova storia intellettuale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017, p. 211-212.

²⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, cit., p. 385-390.

are not afraid of punishment which they don't see and in which they don't believe. It is, then, this renewal which has maintained and continues to maintain this religion.

“Renewal”: in essence, St Francis and St Dominic do not invent anything new, but reproduce the process that had allowed early Christianity, from a minority and persecuted religion, to become, in the fourth century, the dominant religion and morality. It was primarily a cultural and anthropological process that had led a new system of values to take root “in the minds of men” to the point of almost cancelling out the previous one.

The formula, enveloping and oxymoronic, “it is an evil thing to talk evilly of evil doing” (*egli è male dir male del male*) deserves attention because it expresses the paradox produced by this upheaval. In essence, what in the world before was considered evil has, in the world since, become good. Therefore, if speaking evilly of evil has become an evil it is because speaking well of evil has become good. Machiavelli's formula not only describes this reversal but also identifies with great clarity the process through which a majority decides, for fear of sanctions, not to “talk evilly of evil”, that is, to self-censor and tacitly accept the new system of values. This is a phenomenon observed in other historical contexts as well. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville records something similar at the end of the eighteenth century in France, when the old value system faltered under the pressure of a revolutionary minority. What Tocqueville says about the behaviour of the majority is particularly interesting:

Ceux qui n'iaient le christianisme élevant la voix et ceux qui croyaient encore faisant silence, il arriva ce qui s'est vu si souvent depuis parmi nous, non seulement en fait de religion, mais en toute autre matière. Les hommes qui conservaient l'ancienne foi craignirent d'être les seuls à lui rester fidèles, et, redoutant plus l'isolement que l'erreur, ils se joignirent à la foule sans penser comme elle. Ce qui n'était encore que le sentiment d'une partie de la nation parut ainsi l'opinion de tous, et sembla dès lors irrésistible aux yeux mêmes de ceux qui lui donnaient cette fausse apparence²⁵.

In essence, Machiavelli and then Tocqueville identify a sort of “spiral of silence”²⁶, a collective phenomenon of self-censorship that imposes itself with the compelling force of conformism and allows a new moral and political power relationship to be legitimised. Fassin writes that « pour interdire, il faut avoir le pouvoir d'interdire ». Machiavelli and Tocqueville show us that this power is not necessarily on the side of the majority or of the state. The power to speak and to interdict is also (perhaps of-

²⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la révolution*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, p. 156.

²⁶ On this phenomenon, see Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

ten) the prerogative of active minorities who impose themselves through the political use of discredit and the support of silent majorities. And this is probably one of the distinctive features, though less visible and studied, of censorship.

