

Introduction



In ancien-régime Europe the book served as the principal vehicle for transmitting knowledge and ideas.¹ Authors communicated, argued, and persuaded by way of the printed word. Readers responded by purchasing, borrowing, and digesting books as sources of information and inspiration. At the same time, appealing to society's alleged need for protection against itself, absolutist governments and hierarchical churches controlled, directed, and policed the word by means of the censorship machinery at their disposal. This tug-of-war between liberty and restraint continued until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.²

However, nothing is so simple as it first appears; the struggle between authors, printers, publishers, and booksellers on the one hand and governments, judges, churches, and censors on the other is no exception. Both the quest for free expression and the desire to limit it were mitigated by political, religious, economic, and social realities. For example, by the middle of the eighteenth century, authors embraced print as the primary means of conveying the reformist visions of the Enlightenment. Meanwhile, authorities of church and state, while hoping to tamp down calls for change, found themselves conforming to a set of ground rules familiar to those of their opponents.

As a case in point, take the criteria that determined the Catholic Church's list of forbidden books, its *Index librorum prohibitorum*. In 1753, Benedict XIV, a pope well versed in juridical matters and cautiously sympathetic toward scientific discovery, issued the Bull *Anxiously and Prudent (Sollicita ac provida)*.³ It sought to establish fixed principles for book censorship and insisted that an enlightened decision, not a flat condemnation, ought to be the goal of any investigative reading. Rather than be added to the *Index* as a consequence of one or two indiscreet phrases, a book under scrutiny was to be judged as a

whole. Moreover, the literary reputation of its author was to be taken into account; during investigations, the book, not its author, was on trial. Based on revised criteria, a new Roman *Index* was promulgated in 1758.⁴ It classified prohibited books according to distinct categories: those written by non-Catholics or referring to heresies, those treating other forbidden topics, and those misconstruing the sacred rites of the Church.

The new procedure offered church authorities a formula for examining allegedly subversive thought and was meant to standardize censorship criteria. Unfortunately for Rome, “reasonable” papal condemnations were often toothless and had the reverse effect of tempting otherwise pious Catholics to discover first hand just why works such as Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, Rousseau’s *Émile*, and Voltaire’s *Candide* were reprovved. When all is said and done, it was not the opinions of Church censors that defined the cultural politics of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, unresolved internal struggles within the Church, particularly over Jansenist heresy and literature, frustrated the goals of effective papal or episcopal censorship.

Though bishops, assemblies of the clergy, and faculties of theology at universities continued to denounce what they considered to be irreverent books, in practice it was eighteenth-century governments that initiated and enforced most European censorship. The extent of regulation varied from place to place, with the French monarchy overseeing the continent’s most elaborate structures of prevention and repression.⁵ By way of contrast, as Jesuit influence declined in the Habsburg Empire under Maria Theresa (r. 1740–1780) and disappeared altogether under Joseph II (r. 1780–1790), no complex state bureaucracy supplanted it. Joseph’s censorship commission in Vienna temporarily adopted a tolerant policy toward the printed word, one in keeping with the emperor’s compliant attitude regarding religious diversity;⁶ and elsewhere in central Europe, the political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire benefited authors and readers alike.⁷ A writer who discovered that publication was blocked in one German principality might seek out another location more congenial to his or her purposes. To an extent this also was true for politically fragmented Italy.⁸ In Spain under Charles III (r. 1759–1788), reforming ministers sought to make works of the French Enlightenment palatable by eliminating the most offensive passages in them and limiting readership to those with special licenses.⁹ During the early part of her reign, Empress Catherine II of Russia (r. 1762–1796) preferred to encourage literary life rather than suppress it. She reined in traditional forms of censorship enforced by the Orthodox Church, her senate, and the police. She financed the translation of English, French, and German works

into Russian and served as a patron of writers. However, during the 1780s a dramatic shift in Catherine's policy occurred. Peasant uprisings, a freemasonry scare, and, eventually, worries about the internationalization of the French Revolution turned the tsarina into a reactionary. Rather than establish bureaucratic controls over intellectual life, such as a prepublication censorship board, Catherine opted for repressive measures. The police raided bookshops, and well-advertised persecutions of writers and journalists took place. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was banned.¹⁰

To the dismay of Enlightenment intellectuals, lists of prohibited books and agencies of state repression existed nearly everywhere in Europe. The Dutch Netherlands' States-General condemned Rousseau's *Émile*, *Social Contract* (*Du contrat social*), and *Letters Written from the Mountain* (*Lettres écrites de la montagne*), even after first editions of these works were legally printed in Amsterdam.¹¹ Largely because of the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695, Britain alone in Europe opted for courtroom settlements rather than police descents. This fact notwithstanding, the conviction of the journalist John Wilkes for seditious libel and the repeated barring of Wilkes from his elected seat in the House of Commons seemed as heavy handed as any continental act of repression.¹²

In Enlightenment France royal *intendants*, officials of parlements, assemblies of the clergy, police agents, book-trade inspectors, and officers of the booksellers' and printers' guilds cooperated and competed with one another to suppress so-called dangerous writings.¹³ However, when it came to *preventive* censorship—the evaluation of manuscripts or the examination of imported printed works prior to their distribution or of new editions of older works—the primary censorship agency of the Bourbon monarchy was the Department of the Book Trade (*Direction de la librairie*), housed in the offices of the chancellor. During any single year between 1750 and 1789, as few as 122 and as many as 189 censors served as subject specialists.¹⁴ They examined nearly all book manuscripts submitted for publication in France. Once a manuscript obtained a censor's acknowledged approval, its publisher would be awarded a *privilège* or a sealed permission (*permission de sceau*), and the work would be duly registered.¹⁵ After publication the book police and representatives of the publishing industry ensured that the *privilège* or *permission de sceau* was adequately defended and that no pirated versions of the work in question were circulating.¹⁶

During the 1750s, however, the popularity of Enlightenment authors in France placed pressure on the regulatory rigidity of the *privilège* system. French Protestant exiles in the Netherlands and enterprising

publishers residing in small states just beyond the frontiers of the Bourbon monarchy produced books lacking the stately formal *privilège* and exported them to Paris, Lyon, Rouen, and other important towns. French publishers complained that censorship practices worked to their disadvantage while foreigners profited. In response, administrators of the *librairie* authorized for domestic publication *permissions tacites* customarily awarded to foreign publishers, so that French printer-booksellers might apply for them and feel relatively secure undertaking works that failed to attain the level of orthodoxy required by a royal *privilège*. Censors still were obliged to examine manuscripts eventually awarded *permissions tacites*, but the examiners were granted leeway (and public anonymity) in their judgments. “Tacitly permitted” books printed in France often bore a false publication address and were unprotected from piracy or seizure. Nevertheless, between 1750 and 1789, perhaps one of every two new books circulating in the kingdom was either “tacitly permitted,” produced abroad, or else was a clandestine production.¹⁷

On the one hand, *permissions tacites*, verbal tolerances, and extraordinary ministerial approvals complicated life for French royal censors, many of whom were themselves authors.¹⁸ On the other hand, French bishops, quadrennial assemblies of the clergy, the Sorbonne, the Parlement of Paris, provincial parlements, and the Royal Council asserted the right to condemn *ex post facto* published texts. Contradictory judgments by different agencies of church and state imparted an even more arbitrary character to a system already riddled with loopholes. For example, in April 1757 the Royal Council tried to dominate repressive censorship by threatening writers, printers, and merchants of “dangerous books” with the death penalty.¹⁹ The outrageous order never was enforced; but, shortly thereafter, the Parlement of Paris responded by condemning Claude-Adrien Helvétius’s *On the Mind* and the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert—works sanctioned by royal *privilèges*. Contests ensued over authority to suppress.

Daniel Roche notes that, during the Enlightenment, censorship policy in France was influenced as well by the transformation of the state from a political system concerned primarily with law to a system preoccupied with finance.²⁰ Struggles between jurists of the parlements and members of the king’s Council likely reflect this transformation. The royal administration was determined to protect the monopolies of *privilèges* held by Paris’s wealthiest publishers; however, for economic reasons, it also was inclined to encourage publication in France of the sorts of works heretofore abandoned to foreign printers and booksellers. As economic realism challenged ideological purity, homegrown production in-

creased. Authors were disinclined to practice traditional self-censorship and tested the limits of legality. They were satisfied with a *permission tacite* or verbal authorization of their works. Meanwhile, aware of the need to encourage French publishing while at the same time maintaining meaningful quality controls, royal censors perceived their craft as increasingly complicated and fraught with contradiction.

The seven chapters that follow are the fruit of years of thinking about royal censorship practices during the last century of the ancien régime. The first four chapters derive from public lectures that I delivered as a *professeur invité* at the Collège de France. Subsequently they appeared in a French-language edition of my lectures.²¹ By analyzing the pithy remarks by Louis XIV's censors for their negative judgments between 1699 and 1715, I reach conclusions about the qualitative foundations of these judgments. I find that by emphasizing the need for writers to display grace, exactitude, right reason, and empirical validity in their works, censors of the first decade of the eighteenth century were actually laying the groundwork for the critical values of the Enlightenment. In the second chapter, I move to midcentury and contextualize the great censorship scandal involving Helvétius's book *On the Mind* within the constitutional struggle between parlements and the royal administration—a struggle that plagued most of the reign of Louis XV. I also analyze the memoranda on the book trade (1759) by the government's director of the censorship office, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721–1794). Malesherbes's memoranda sought to “rationalize” the practice of formal examination by spokesmen of the state, discourage arbitrary decision making, and expand the boundaries of toleration. My third and fourth chapters examine the place of the royal censors in Enlightenment culture. Who were they? Did they comprise a distinct “cultural class” of academicians, journalists, university professors, and intellectuals who believed they possessed the authority to exercise a *censure positive* that encouraged debate and a *censure négative* that silenced what they considered unsubstantiated thought?

My fifth and sixth chapters cover the prerevolutionary period. I examine censors' reports between 1764 and 1787, noting the evolution of topics covered and observing an apparent shift in censors' critical sensibilities. During this period censors envisioned themselves as agents of public utility, opening doors to works that, without their sanction, might be relegated to prohibited book status. In my seventh chapter, I evaluate the professional career of a prolific censor, J.-B.-C. Cadet de Sainville (1730–1814), examining his reports on works dealing with economic reform and with the American rebellion against Great Britain. Cadet de Sainville's reports form a narrative line delineating the twists

and turns of semi-official French policies toward the Americans and democracy.²² My concluding remarks suggest that, during the years immediately prior to the Revolution of 1789, “preventive” censorship in France no longer was tested primarily against theoretical and abstract standards of proper morality, theological principle, royal politics, or levels of personal affront. Before the altar of public utility, the separation between “superior” and “ordinary” readers dissolved, and discrete knowledge fields themselves would define acceptable discourse.