AGAINST CENSORSHIP
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“A street trader who sold T-shirts proclaiming "Liverpool 38 Juventus 1" in reference to the Brussels football tragedy was fined £300 by a London magistrate ... [who] said: "This seems to be tastelessness beyond the bounds of credibility"." (1)

One of the more disturbing trends in Britain today is the lack of serious opposition to the increasing state restriction on freedom of speech and expression. The right to free speech, of course, has never existed in British law, and the state has regularly imposed controls on it, especially in wartime. During the First World War a man in Scotland was imprisoned for sedition for distributing copies of the Serreon on the Mount! Nonetheless the idea that people had the right to read, write and view the material they chose, in private and at their own expense, gained ground in the 1960s and 70s. When in 1977 Gay News was convicted of blasphemy under an 18th century law for publishing a poem which depicted Jesus as a homosexual, the public image of censorship was probably as low as it has been in this century. Unfortunately, a new climate of intolerance has since grown up among both conservatives and socialists, which has led to further limitations on freedom of expression (such as the "video nasties" act which forces all videos to undergo state censorship) and the more oppressive use of existing legislation, such as the Obscene Publications Act and the Customs Act. (2)

Our freedom of speech has been curtailed by a malicious body of legislation that takes away from us the control of our own lives and gives it to others we have never met, because what can only be interpreted subjectively, undermines the rule of law. An individual cannot know whether material he is reading, buying, writing, publishing or selling is liable to have him prosecuted or not. In the above example, a man is fined for selling a shirt with a slogan that a magistrate thinks is in bad taste. I find much (if not most) of the rubbish put out on televisions "to be tastelessness beyond the bounds of credibility", but I am forced to finance it through my television license and am also prohibited by law from setting up a station broadcasting material I would prefer.

One problem with subjective laws is that, as with every other area of state activity, their administration will become increasingly expensive rather than remaining static, and will thus become more expensive to uphold. The Obscene Publications Act prohibits material "liable to deprave and corrupt" (from what into what?) and originally applied largely to heterosexual "pornography". Of course, nobody has ever produced definitions of the words "obscene" or "pornographic" that everybody accepts, and so the decision to seize "obscene" material rested with the police, with temptations for bribery and corruption that could hardly have left Dixon of Dock Green unmoved. The local police enough money remained in business: why else is one sex shop raided, prosecuted and fined or closed down while the one down the road, selling identical material, goes unmolested? (Material for which sex shop owners have been convicted under the Obscene Publications Act includes a book of Picasso's paintings.) The Obscene Publications Act is probably the primary cause of police corruption in recent years. Its sole effect on the supply of "pornography" has been to make police bribes one of the overheads of those who wish to sell it.

But considerably worse than that, the Obscene Publications Act is being used as a weapon against minority groups of which the authorities or the police may disapprove. Recently, Knockabout Comics was prosecuted for selling comics and other literature that, according to the police, showed drug-taking "in a sympathetic light" and was therefore "liable to deprave and corrupt" (although almost all the material had been available in Britain for over a decade with no catastrophic effects.) Knockabout Comics, a small operation, was successfully acquitted, but only after a year in the courts which drove it almost to bankruptcy. We have reached a situation where the police, in their small operation which cannot afford to pay them off as the big sex-shop chains can, simply by raiding them and taking them to court. Similarly, the London bookshop Gay's The Word is being prosecuted under the Customs Act for allegedly importing "obscene" homosexual literature (which includes a book that has been continually in print in England since the 15th century), and is now facing a lengthy court case with much of its stock held by a magistrate, who could well bankrupt it even if it is found not guilty. (3)

FORBIDDEN AND COMPULSORY

The ridiculous thing about censorship laws is that they cannot benefit even those who seek to use them to impose a particular view on other people, so subjective are they, and so malleable is public taste. To take a single example, in 1971 the chapter on sex in The Little Red Schoolbook (written by two German Macabuses: Heron Hanson and Jasper Jensen) was declared obscene by a London magistrate and had to be re-written (although the book was published uncensored in several Western European countries, the United States and Australia, being banned in France). I have read the original, uncensored edition, and the chapter in question is remarkably tame compared with some
of the sex education material that taxpayers and ratepayers are forced to pay for through state schools, the Health Education Council and the Family Planning Association. The text is free for evolutionists. Make It Happy by Jane Cousins. But the Schoolbook remains censored.

Often it is difficult to see what exactly the authorities seek to gain by imposing censorship. Many of them seem to have been over the state suppression of information about the security services. For instance, a British court ordered the suppression of part of The Circus, a history of British intelligence since 1945 by Nigel West, and it is now available only in censored form in this country. Yet the uncut version is in best-seller lists in the United States, available to anyone (including myself) able to spend four dollars in an American bookshop. There are few instances of censorship not by the government, the KGB, the IRA, or whoever is not supposed to know the censored information.

SELECTIVE OPPOSITION

One problem in the struggle against censorship is that those who claim to oppose it are in fact in favour of censorship of material of which they disapprove. The New Statesman, for instance, is a valuable source of news about state suppression of information on the security services, drug-related and homosexual material, and other opinions regarded as dangerous or intolerant. (5) The government does not wish to see such material available in seconds to anywhere in the world with access to a computer. And no censor anywhere in the world will be able to do a thing about it. (6)

Supporters of state censorship should have the intelligence to see that in a few years any attempt to control the free flow of information will simply not be feasible. It is probable that the growing power of international censorship is in existence, a new libertarian world, a vast network of information unexplained by any central authority, and capable of being used by any government. This information, no matter how pornographic, offensive, seditious, homosexual, drug-related, blasphemous, racist, subversive, deprived of its control and available in seconds to anywhere in the world with access to a computer. No censor anywhere in the world will be able to do a thing about it. (6)

NOTES

(1) Guardian, July 15th 1965, p.1
(2) Respectable opinion fluctuates. While the Liverpool man responsible for the Italian deaths in Brussels are today universally executed, during the war they would have been regarded as heroes for doing much the same thing, especially if both sides had been armoured and in uniform.
(3) The change in opinion has been especially remarkable on the left. Today's socialist support for censorship of pornographic material should be compared with the files of any left-wing newspaper or book on the subject circa 1970. One gains the impression that the entire British left has taken a day-trip to Damascus at some stage between then and now.
(4) Taxpayers and ratepayers are now in the ridiculous situation of being forced to finance both these two forms of persecution of homosexuals and draft avoidance for "gay centres" via the Greater London Council and other local authorities, the latter with the support of homosexuals for the leadership of these bodies. If the GLC, for instance, was really interested in helping homosexuals (or helping the disabled or any other group) it would be far easier to simply reduce its expenditure on both that would not have the necessary political pay-off.
(5) On my recent trip to the USA I picked up a number of books banned in this country, including the Yippie manual Technical. This book seems very useful for its information on growing cannabis.
(6) I recall reading some years ago that a man bought a book at a Heathrow Airport newsstand, went on holiday and returned to have it confiscated by customs on arrival. On another occasion customs officers seized books called Pun In Bed and Have Around Our Gas. The former turned out to be a collection of scenes for sick children, the latter a study of soil erosion.

TECHNOLOGY AND CENSORSHIP

Putile as censorship is already, the spread of computer technology is in any case making any attempt to control the free flow of information physically impossible. Already texts can be transmitted across the world in seconds, and the growing ownership of increasingly sophisticated home computers will make censorship as impossible in the twenty-first century as universal literacy would have been in the eighteenth. The technological revolution is bringing into existence a new libertarian world, a vast network of information unexplained by any central authority, and capable of being used by any government. This information, no matter how pornographic, offensive, seditious, homosexual, drug-related, blasphemous, racist, subversive, deprived of its control and available in seconds to anywhere in the world with access to a computer. No censor anywhere in the world will be able to do a thing about it. (6)