On censorship and translation

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Piotr Kuhiwczak’s thought provoking paper ‘Translation and censorship’ never explicitly defines what PK means by censorship. He does say “In the Cold War period, censorship meant a restriction on what could be stated in print, in public spaces, or on terrestrial radio and television channels” but suggests that today’s censorship is more extensive: “censorship has a constant discursive presence associated with power relations” – the outcome of social norms. I think the latter is about right, and that censorship is the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good. This raises two questions: (a) Who does the censoring? (PK has some discussion of this); (b) How should the phrase subversive of the common good be interpreted? For instance, the censorship of incitement to (as well as actual) violence against any citizen supposedly guards against their physical harm. The censorship of profanity and blasphemy supposedly guards against their moral harm. The censorship of pornography supposedly guards against their moral harm and perhaps physical danger by someone stimulated to rapine action by exposure to the excitement of pornography. All of these potentially arise in the work of a translator, though they have a more general provenance.

In Ancient Rome the censor was at first a magistrate with the function of registering citizens and assessing their property for taxation. This sense lives on in our noun census, to which there is a throw-back when censors claim to reflect and act upon the consensus of right-thinking people in their community. The work of a Roman censor expanded to include supervision of moral conduct with the authority to censure and penalize offenders against public morality. For many centuries, in many cultures and jurisdictions, governments have exercised censorship as a means of regulating the moral and political life of their people.

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2 What are the criteria for identifying “right-thinking people”?
Censorship is often extended to the control of news, propaganda and even would-be private correspondence in times of hot and cold war or perceived national emergency or external threat. Thus censors are ‘thought police’ given to censure, given to blaming, finding fault with, disapproving or condemning. Censors license for public distribution speeches, writings and other works of art, scholarship, and reportage; but they are less celebrated for what they sanction than infamous for what they restrict and prohibit. This, I think, is the idea that lies behind PK’s essay on censorship.

Like most writers on censorship, PK fails to distinguish censorship from censoring. The difference is subtle. When PK writes of “publishers, editors, journalists, theatre directors, writers and, not least, translators” as “agents involved in censorship” he is referring to their censoring of their own work or the work of others. The censoring of language is the proscription of language expressions that are taboo for the censor at a given time in contexts which are specified or specifiable because those proscribed language expressions are condemned for being subversive of the good of some specified, specifiable or contextually identifiable community. The phrase the censoring of language encompasses both institutional acts and those of individuals: everyone censors their own or censures another’s behaviour from time to time, and for such occasions they can be justly described as a censor; but the title is temporary and contingent upon the occasional act of censoring. All kinds of tabooed behaviour are subject to censoring, but only certain kinds are subject to censorship – for instance, child pornography is subject to both censorship and to censoring but picking your nose in public is subject only to censoring. Shakespeare’s work was subject to censoring (rather than censorship) by Dr Thomas Bowdler in 1818 who omitted “those words ... which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family”. As with many censors today he rejected what he perceived to be profane or sensual, but kept the violence. Unlike most such sanctimonious busybodies, Bowdler was the inspiration for an eponymous neologism bowdlerize ‘censoring a work of art to make a travesty of it’.
The tradition of censorship in the English-speaking world arose from the religious troubles of the Reformation and policies of Henry VIII in the 1530s. For many centuries the focus was on suppressing heresy and anything likely to stir up political revolt; before the nineteenth century it was rare to find a concern with indecency and licentiousness and that concern seems to have receded again since the 1960s. Religious censorship is today strongest in Islamic societies, in some of which (e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan) blasphemy is punishable by death. In Britain it was castigated and offenders fined and perhaps occasionally imprisoned between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. It is still frowned upon as demonstrated by the fact that Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* (of a crucifix in urine)\(^3\) has been accused of being blasphemous. When *Piss Christ* travelled to Australia in September 1997 Roman Catholic Archbishop (later Cardinal) Dr George Pell in an affidavit before the court said: “Both the name and the image *Piss Christ* not only demean Christianity but also represent a grossly offensive, scurrilous and insulting treatment of Christianity’s most sacred and holy symbol.” On October 12, 1997 the photograph was attacked with a hammer in The National Gallery of Victoria and immediately removed from exhibition.

Criticism of God, monarchs, heads of state and other persons of rank is often severely censored, particularly in times of national instability where the criticism is perceived to be hostile to the prevailing government ideology and seems likely to stir up discontent and create disorder. The correlation of words and actions was recognized in Milton’s *Areopagitica* of 1644.

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Bookes demeane themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors: For books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men.  

(Milton 1644: 4)

On the face of it, then, language censorship – like the restriction on gun ownership – is a reasonable constraint against abuses of social interaction amongst human beings. However, attitudes to restrictions on gun ownership in, say, Britain differ markedly from those of many

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\(^3\) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piss_Christ]
citizens of the United States, where in addition the Second Amendment of the U.S.
Constitution, 44 States have Constitutional provisions affirming the individual’s right to keep and bear arms. Adjusted for population, each year in the United States around 31 times more people die of gun wounds and around 300 times more people are injured by guns than in Britain. Statistical evidence on the effects of widespread gun-ownership fails to influence the views of the American supporters of their gun laws: their beliefs in the rightness of their cause outweigh any rational counterargument. Compare this situation with what happens with respect to language censorship: certain beliefs are held by politically powerful members of the community on the ways that language can subvert the common good and no amount of rational argument against their position will be accepted.

Milton’s principal argument against censorship is that it chokes access to knowledge, stifles the pursuit of art and learning, and cripples human development and progress (Milton 1644: 4, 26). He warned that censorship puts untoward power into the hands of people who are by inclination illiberal and unlikely to be artistically creative or broadly schooled. The judgment of a censor is open to error, fashion, whim, and corruption (ibid. 7, 22, 24). Censorship invariably fails to prevent people intent on flouting it. Surely, tolerance is the best policy, and trust should be placed in the judgment of the individual person. Milton quotes St Paul I Thessalonians 5:21, try all things, hold fast to that which is good, because knowledge cannot defile a man of good conscience and good will (ibid. 11, 37). True, Milton was thinking only of sophisticated, well-educated male individuals like himself; on behalf of such people he offers a strong argument against censorship. And we can update his seventeenth century biases to those of today. The counterargument from Big Brother is that censorship is necessary to protect the innocent, the inexperienced, the ignorant, the morally weak: the alternative is an invitation to anarchy. Perhaps we can identify groups within a society who do manage to act without admitting any censorship, linguistic and otherwise, on their behaviour; but there exists no comprehensive society, constituted of humans of both sexes in all age ranges and a full range of occupations, that does not censor some kinds of behaviour – by custom if not by law. The problem for any human society is to how to constrain censorship to allow for maximum expression of personal freedoms without these subverting the common good.

Is it dangerous to read the works of the Marquis de Sade? Donatien Alphonse François, Comte de Sade (1740–1814) was able to exploit his position as a well-connected member of the Ancien Régime of pre-revolutionary France to commit sodomy, rape, whippings and
mutilations of prostitutes; and to abduct and sexually abuse boys and girls. He also
masturbated on a crucifix. For such behaviours he was imprisoned, executed in effigy, and
only escaped the guillotine by chance. His fictional accounts of violent sexual behaviour were
even more grotesque than what he practiced; they glorify the abuse of power that enables a
sociopath to exercise tyrannical whim over a powerless victim to the extent of debauching,
enslaving, torturing, mutilating, and murdering them. In Sade’s writings, virtue can never
win; his dominant characters defend a philosophy of selfishness, hedonism, debauchery,
immorality, torture, and general mayhem like celebrating the decapitation of a woman by her
lover because she orgasmed; having the Pope not only bugger a woman while masturbating
her, but to claim “never do I retire for the night with unbloodied hands. … Murder is one of
[Nature’s] laws … that … is no crime at all” (Juliette Sade 1968: 765). In the same novel
Noireceuil and Juliette celebrate their marriage by torturing, mutilating, and dismembering
several young women as Noireceuil sodomizes them. In turn, he is buggered by his sons; then
buggers one of them while eating the boy’s heart that has been torn out by Juliette as she is
being masturbated. While Juliette is penetrated front and back by flunkeys, she accedes to
Noireceuil having her young daughter Marianne held down first to be anally and then
vaginally raped; then, as Juliette orgasms, she offers Marianne to him as a sacrifice. Such vile
deeds are not punished, virtue never prevails in Sade; instead he has the King appoint
Noireceuil prime minister.

It is hardly surprising that Sade’s writings were subject to censorship. Because of them,
Napoleon condemned Sade to the insane asylum at Charenton for the last thirteen years of his
life. Sade’s son burned some of his manuscripts; others circulated underground or were on
restricted access in the Bibliothèque Nationale until the twentieth century. By the 1960s they
were widely available to the general public. It has been suggested (Shattuck 1996) that
because Sade’s work was claimed in their trials to have influenced the Moors murderers, Ian
Brady and Myra Lindley, in 1965 and the serial killer Ted Bundy during the 1970s, there is a
case for censoring at least some of Sade’s texts. The argument for censorship is that, although
most readers will not be provoked to copy the violent sexual excesses of Sade’s fictional
characters (nor even of the man himself), there may be some benighted souls who are – with
severe consequences for their victims and concomitant cost to the community. There is a
parallel with the justification for restrictions on cigarette smoking, which are based on the
cost in disease and death not only to the smokers themselves, but to the community as a
whole. The difference is that whereas cigarette smoking causes disease that may lead to
death, there is no evidence that reading works such as *Juliette* has in fact caused debauchery or torture – although their enjoyments may be concomitant. As long as mankind as been in existence there has been sexual perversion, child abuse, rape, torture, mutilation and murder mostly by people who had never heard of Sade and certainly not read him; a handful of examples from among thousands that are recorded (never mind what has gone unrecorded) include Caligula (Gaius Caesar Germanicus 12–41 CE) and the late fifteenth century Vlad Die Tepes (the impaler) known as Dracula. The sixteenth century Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Báthory reputedly humiliated, sexually mutilated and tortured to death 650 girls and women, on occasion feeding their flesh to soldiers and drinking (also perhaps bathing in) the blood of virgins. In 1936 white American Albert Fish was executed after raping, torturing, murdering and eating at least 15 mostly poor, black children; he consumed not only their flesh, but urine, blood and excrement in order to experience immense sexual pleasure (or so he claimed). In 2001 three Serbs were convicted of systematic rape, torture and enslavement of Muslim girls and women in Bosnia in 1992. In 1994 Hutus in the Rwandan Interahamwe militia raped (sometimes with artefacts), enslaved, tortured, and mutilated the genitals and breasts of Tutsi women, sometimes forcing them to kill their own children. It is impossible or very unlikely that any of this small sample of horrific acts against defenceless victims were committed by people inspired by the writings of the Marquis de Sade. It is possible that exposure to Sade’s work expands the imagination of anyone predisposed to sadistic behaviour such as those in the historical record; there are reports of pornographic and violent movies being cited as evidence for the normality of illegal acts (including murder) that have been committed; there is little doubt that, today, those who act like Sade and his characters often do possess quantities of violent, pornographic, and sadomasochistic stimulatory material in various media. Here I make no judgment on graphic media, but limit myself to language: to censor Sade’s written works is no more effective than shooting the messenger for bringing bad news.

There is another argument against censorship: as Publius Cornelius Tacitus (first century CE) pointed out, banned writings are eagerly sought and read; once the proscription is dropped, interest in them wanes. To maintain authority over dogma and biblical texts the early Christian church proscribed texts deemed heretical such as the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalen), certain works of Aristotle, and the *Talmud*. Existing heretical works were burned on the recommendation of St Paul. From 1467, the Church in Europe required all books to be approved by the local Ordinary, usually a Bishop, and in 1545 the first *Index Librorum*
Prohibitorum was published. This created new market opportunities for booksellers and in 1589 the Church found it necessary to outlaw lay possession of copies of the Index Librorum Haereticorum. Censorship nearly always has such confounding effects. The prohibition on the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States 1920–33 was notoriously ineffective and counterproductive in that it led to the establishment of organized crime syndicates. The experience has had little effect on today’s law-makers, who insist on banning recreational drugs with similar results. Attempts by Senator Jesse Helms and others to ban a 1988 retrospective of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s work led to its universal notoriety and a ten-fold increase in prices. One has to conclude that censorship is utterly futile; but we can confidently expect it to continue so long as there are humans in this universe.

Because translators must necessarily recast into the target language the text they are translating in terms of their own understanding of it in the source language, they cannot avoid imputing at least some of their own belief and prejudices. However much they may attempt to put these aside, the translation will be influenced by them. So translators may indeed eschew censorship, but they cannot completely avoid censoring the language of their translations.

References

