

Censorship And The Fissured Time

István KIRÁLY
Department of Philosophy
“Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca

With variable intensity, and from various angles of approach, the topic of censorship, and chiefly of communist censorship, is constantly present in cultural studies, analyses, and debates following 1989 in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and more. In the countries of the ex-socialist bloc the studies connected to the problem of censorship have a distinctive feature that separates them from any other similar approaches, primarily of the Western liberal democratic cultures. I refer to the fundamental fact that in these countries and cultures **the subject and the public analysis of censorship was itself censored**. In other words, here the phenomenon of censorship has lost – culturally speaking – the reflexive synchronicity with itself! Unlike in this case, in liberal democratic countries the procedures, attempts, and interferences of a censorial nature **immediately**, or even **meanwhile** become the objects of debates which usually develop in a public space.

Thus, censoring the subject of censorship deprives the latter of the synchronicity with its own topic and forces it to a post festum territory, compelling it to be situated mainly in the domain of “pure historical knowledge” regarding a strange past which, in terms of its own discourse, **was not even present**...

All these – with other related specific aspects – lend a peculiar hermeneutical difficulty and gravity to the (current) discourse on communist censorship. But the very outline, recognition, and undertaking of this difficulty and responsibility may fail on the simple statement – correct, otherwise – that the topic of censorship is today indisputably “timely”.

Censorship has become today a topic of debate, reflection, and attitude due to several reasons, some of which are clearly **global**. The global electronic accessibility of information from the very beginning places the issue of traditional communication barriers and restrictions into new paradigms. Then, with the help of these new possibilities and opening perspectives, and the increase of mutual interest, ever-newer diversities aspire and accede to ways and means of manifestations (largely public), questioning the techniques and mentalities that they consider hampering. Generally speaking: both formally and effectively, the freedom of manifestation and expression – or, more precisely, its guarantees, frameworks, and forms – gradually loses its stake and its strictly local-regional circumstances, and therefore it becomes thematized and problematic, more emphatically each day, on the basis of a global or globalizing interest.

All this is combined with more specific and contradictory evolution – let us only think of the censorial phenomena in the Yugoslavia of the past years – that is, with the weight and importance of post-communist societies for which, strictly speaking, it became a condition and an element of their liberation to render censorship problematic. To this, the contradictions of the end of the Cold War add up, a war political, economical, and of arming at the same time, yet also of propaganda and information, which played a decisive role in legitimating ideologies and practices of the different censorships of both sides.

Therefore it is no wonder, that there are international congresses and symposia organized on the topic of censorship these days, international encyclopedias are edited, and databases are created (again international), etc.

Furthermore, there are particular reasons that make us, people of this region, approach the problem of censorship as one of an ardent actuality, since, certainly, the culture and mentality of Central and Eastern Europe still bears on itself the “effects” of censorship

practiced here between decades five to eight of this century. First of all, I am referring to the fact that, from an organic point of view, it is very significant **when** and **how** a book, an article, or a newspaper, a theatre play or a film “appears” within a culture and a social mentality... It has to be clear that the edition or re-edition **today** of a **sometime** censored literary work has different significations, effects, and consequences than the ones it should have had – hypothetically, of course – in “its own time”. On the other hand, the – otherwise laudable – gestures of posterior publication lack the power of removing the consequences of the former censoring. Notwithstanding the fact that in this way – meanwhile – even the attitudes that were (**then**) censored, may appear **now** as having merely a completed “historical” and hermeneutical meaning, and lack the full possibility to “touch” present actuality, related to which they remain condemned to an eternal phase difference...

Experience still shows that, after 1989, the reflexes of intolerance and of dictatorship have not died out completely, or at least that they could any time be revived, and which in various forms are tempted to resurrect censorship ... (I only mention here, for Romania, the recent case of a notification and the reaction to it by the Police of Braşov, following which a real investigation was launched about ... two poems!)

* * *

Inevitably, the studies made and published today on the topic of censorship situate themselves in **this context** of their actuality. Therefore, they must be perceived according to the ways they realize – or not – the gravity and scope of this context.

A pleasant face: three volumes were published lately, all concerning the topic of censorship. These are: Marian Petcu: *Puterea și cultura. O istorie a cenzurii* (Power and Culture: A History of Censorship; Iași: Polirom, 1999, 213 p.); Bogdan Ficeac: *Cenzura comunistă și formarea “omului nou”* (Communist Censorship and the Formation of the “New Man”; Bucharest: Nemira, 1999, 123 p.); and Adrian Marino: *Cenzura în România. Schiță istorică introductivă* (Censorship in Romania: An Introductory Historical Outline; Craiova: Aius, 2000, 98 p.). These are all inevitably characterized by a certain “historism”, differently fixed and conditioned from case to case, so much from the angle of the periods discussed, as from its scope. Adrian Marino and B. Ficeac concentrate on the Romanian case (for different time periods, though); Marian Petcu also includes the history of censorship in England, France, Germany and Austria, Italy, the United States, Spain, and Russia. The volumes of Petcu and Ficeac are nevertheless dominated by a certain anecdotism and descriptivism, meant not as a stylistic feature, but as a way of gathering and exposing the data the connections of which often remain suspended in the air of explanation...

I will concentrate first of all on the book of Adrian Marino, because of the fact that it supersedes from the start the theoretical level of all previous approaches, due to the depth and extent of the horizon of categories in conceiving the treatment of the subject. Although subtitled an “outline”, and what is more, “introductory” – the volume still captures the topic of censorship from the ample perspective of the historical dialectics of its fundamental parameters: the idea of censorship as connected and opposed to that of freedom of thought and expression. This is what guarantees the broadness of the author’s project, naturally not completed in the present volume, but which still opens it towards a treatment of the topic matching its complexity and gravity. It happens, however, in spite of the fact that the text is based (besides direct experience) on previously published information – though mostly forgotten on library shelves –, but which the author puts forward in a rigorously systematized way, from the perspective of a historian and a scholar of the hermeneutics of ideas. Thus, although “historical”, Marino’s “outline” is not a “historiographic” history of censorship in Romania, but it focuses on the paradigms of this history examined from the viewpoint of a

comparatist and historian of **ideas**. The data and events that happened in determined regions and historical periods gain thus a systematic co-pertinence that contains the complexity of essential moments, but also their European, ideological, and comparative framework.

The fact that we are dealing with a text inspired by the request of the editors of an international encyclopedia (Censorship. A World Encyclopedia), accounting for the concise style and the size of the book, seems to be of a rather situational, and clearly secondary importance as compared to the intellectual horizon that it opens and outlines. Ultimately, a research should not be understood only by the perspective of what it “knows” or brings to knowledge, but also by what it makes able to be known or understood. Thus, I repeat, the very theoretical basis that supports the analysis of the phenomenon of censorship in its relations with the idea of the freedom of expression lends to this research a certain special substantiality. Its amplitude however can be reckoned – for lack of space – only comparatively, for example, with a phrase in B. Ficeac’s volume (true, by the author of the Preface, Daniel Barbu), which reads: “Resistance through culture (author’s italics) is, thus, a nonsense (italics mine, I.K.), as long as the entire culture of the five decades of totalitarianism is the product (italics mine, I.K.) of various, yet infallible, mechanisms of censorship” (p. 11) That is, a phrase lacking any depth, understanding, and ultimately, meaning. Similarly, in M. Petcu’s volume, following a first chapter with theoretical tinges – and even merits – (e.g., a substantial attempt to define the term “censorship”), there are a series of historical discussions, where the structures emphasized mostly typologically in the theoretical part of the chapter are seldom referred to... Although being a university reader, consistent perhaps in its own tradition, one may still find in Petcu’s volume the same lack of an organic treatment, and the same anecdotism.

The majority of the analyses show however that the data of censorship in Romania do not differ essentially from those of the censorship in Europe – or for that matter Eastern Europe – in different periods, yet “specific particularities are not absent either” (A. Marino, p. 11). Inevitably, and obviously at the same time, due to its “closeness”, the attention is and remains to be drawn on the **communist** history of censorship. This however cannot be treated separately from the techniques and focuses of censorship in other times and other places. Yet, its specificity – or the specificity of the Romanian history of communist censorship – cannot be overlooked. Even more so, that – it seems – it is this aspect which proves to be the most “resistant” to the elaboration of comprehensive and explanatory concepts. The main issue is in fact to find out whether the particularities of communist censorship only reside in the “communist” specificity of the values conditioning it, corroborated with the totalitarian character of the regimes in question, or, whether other categorial mechanisms that are able to render its full scope and uniqueness are also necessary to describe and understand it. Thus, it is exactly a comparative view which warns us that actually all the censorial techniques and orientations found in the history of communism were used – as a historical “acquisition” of different periods of time – in other times and places as well ... It is clear thus that the central problem and difficulty of the history and understanding of censorship is – and remains – the question of the specificity of communist censorship. And without “solving” it, we will be unable to give a satisfying answer to the question of the historical specificities of Romanian communist censorship.

At this point, however, the book of B. Ficeac has to be remembered as a truly regrettable fact. Called by a reviewer (in the *România Literară*, No. 39, 4-10 October 2000) an “essay” – the context does not suggest that it is a euphemism... –, the volume superficially attacks, and with precarious intellectual tools, a subject the understanding of which should be considered of a major importance as much from a historical perspective, as from a current cultural one. In a perfectly journalistic style, the author relates that he had the “chance” to have access to the archives of the former Committee of the Press and Printings,

functioning between 1949-1977, which contained Circulars, Ordinances, Regulations, and other documents which, on the “abrogation” of the office, were delivered to the State Archives General Department, and which, as the author underlines, **are inaccessible even today to the public.** (p. 37) In spite of this, amazingly, the documents are presented with no observance of any rules for publication of archival documents, or with no substantial attempt to comment on and/or interpret them. In addition, all bibliographical reference – consulted or NOT – is omitted. Despite this, the preface writer named before affirms that we are dealing with “the first rigorously (sic!) documented analysis for the Romanian case”¹ (p. 10) of the phenomenon of censorship, when in fact it is exactly documentation and rigor that the enterprise in question lacks, since no one can confidently use texts in analyses and studies that cannot be trusted to be faithfully and completely transcribed. Consequently, such attempts (not “essays”) produce confusions, rather than contribute to the determination of problems. Moreover, although repeatedly (not known whether consistently) signaling the fact – conceived more as a journalistic effect – that the system considered these documents **secret**, the author has no doubts about their interpretation and understanding.

That is, the question is never raised how it is possible that such “secret” Ordinances, Circulars, and other regulations may outline and particularize the entire public (or, ultimately: published!) physiognomy of the journalistic, yet also theatrical, cinematographic, etc. spheres of a social globality.

In reality the essential specificity of communist censorship lies exactly in its fundamentally **secret** character. It is installed – in Romania just as everywhere – by the gradual withdrawal and distortion of the censorial criteria and institutions from the public space, which are to a certain extent natural in wartime. This is valid just as much for preliminary or preventive censorship (also called **a priori**), as for retroactive censorship (also called, with a somewhat confusing technical term, **a posteriori**), and it finds itself in perfect synchrony with the modifications in the field of legislation with regard to state and professional secrets. Behind and at the basis of communist censorship there is also this procedure, discreet, and especially and utterly secret. The censorship of manuscripts (completed before their publication) happens each time based on criteria that in fact constitute the secrets of the Office. Even more, as Oskar Stanislaw Czarnik remarks, “The interdiction of a publication itself remained a professional and political secret, and even the partial interventions did not leave any visible marks in a text (finally) printed.” (Cf. *Le contrôle de la communication littéraire en Pologne durant la période 1945-1956*. In: *Livres, Éditions, Bibliothèques, Lecture durant la Guerre Froid*. Paris: Centre Sèvres, 1998, 132.) The seemingly discreet trait of the censoring of a manuscript (as it happens in the intimacy of an editorial office, and is carried out over a yet unpublished book) is actually based on the secret nature of the procedure of communist censorship. As for the censorship of texts and publications already printed and distributed, it was achieved through the system of secret library stock, that is, the system of the secret interdiction of publications. It is not at all by mere chance therefore – and by no means simply an “interesting case” – that most documents of the censorial Office archives and those of the secret library stock bear upon them the stamp of secret documents... (On this, see: Ionuț Costea, István Király, Doru Radosav: *Fond secret. Fond “S” special. Contribuții la istoria fondurilor secrete de bibliotecă din România*. Studiu de caz. *Biblioteca Centrală Universitară “Lucian Blaga” Cluj-Napoca* (Secret Stock. Special “S” Stock. Contributions to the history of the secret library stock in Romania. A case-study. The Central University Library “Lucian Blaga” Cluj-Napoca). Cluj-Napoca:

¹ The debated question of **pioneering** in the matter may easily be settled by reading the texts of Adrian Marino in numbers 49-54 of the journal *Sfera Politicii* (The Sphere of Politics), which were published, still, in 1997!!!, and the text of his present volume does not differ essentially from those said there...

Dacia, 1995.) Let alone the fact that the institution of censorship was officially and publicly “abrogated” in Romania in 1977, which meant nothing else in fact than being transformed into an “institution” and a practice entirely secret...

It is precisely this what characterizes the “historical” peculiarity of Romanian communist censorship. This means, firstly, the fact that in Romania **there was no** de-stalinization, only something which may rather be called a tacit, and as much as possible silent removal from Stalinism, during which, however, with the very help of the preceding secret retrospective censorship, and unlike in other countries, the majority of the party’s leadership survived the preceding period. Then, secondly, towards the middle of the ‘80s, in Romanian cultural policy there seems to be an emphatic tendency of **returning to Stalinism** (most prominently in the anachronistic Zhdanovism of Ceaușescu’s speech in Mangalia). That is, in the full process of the “perestroika” and “glasnost” extending to other countries, in the socialist Romania the concepts of the Stalinist-Zhdanovist “socialist realism” were revived, which had at their core the very idea of “revolutionary romanticism”...

Yet, the particularity of communist censorship of being a secret censorship makes it especially difficult to be understood and explained, since such an attempt must be accompanied by and based on a meditation focusing on the category of the secret, and its specific role in the structuring of the social globality of socialism. In terms of censorship, then, what makes the difference between realist socialism and other types of totalitarian systems, is the very fact that, for example, nazism and fascism interdicted and destroyed publications in the form of a public deed (such as the public purging of libraries, or public book burning in town squares, etc.) The censorial criteria that regulated the “publication” of manuscript texts were themselves public as well. (On this issue, see: Marie Kuhlmann, Nelly Kuntzmann, Hélène Bellour: *Cenzura și bibliotecile în secolul XX*. (Censorship and libraries in the 20th century). Timișoara: Amarcord, 1999, 38-39.) The most difficult issue to be considered and explained remains thus exactly the secret nature of this censorship...

This difficulty, understandably, appears even more emphatically to those who have **not** had any experience with this type of censorship, and therefore to them it has to be exposed in more details... Actually, not long ago we received a circular letter in which a certain Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression announced that they are about to create an international bibliographic database on “censored literature”. But – amazingly – they ask for the following data in order to create their database: “Title, in the original and in English, author, editor, year of publication, date/year of censoring (sic!), reason (sic!) for censoring, and (incredibly) the ISBN number of the publication.” It is clear that, to those who intend to create this database, communist censorship appears in a totally distorted way; that is, as a dialogical public institution, which offers detailed explanations about its reasons for censoring, and the time period of its operations, and at the same time it is concerned about providing an international standard bibliographic number for the publications of which it “takes care”... So there is in fact a complete misunderstanding about the phenomenon of (Romanian) communist censorship.

However, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the specificity of the Romanian history of censorship can offer the most appropriate – and privileged – field for understanding communist censorship in general. Since, precisely because of the evasion of de-stalinization and the return of “neo”-Stalinist motifs, the “cultural” policy of Romanian communism favored the “development”, to maturity and permanently, of all the motifs which can hardly be found elsewhere, and also of the tendencies that defy the ultimate categorial (temporal) limits of the phenomenon.

Thus, to the fissured time of censorship the breaking of time into secrecy is also added, which can never be put together again unless we realize that it is a part not only of our inheritance, but also of our present physiognomy.