Call for papers

The Blue Pencil of Censorship: Controlling, Bypassing and Diffusing information in Non-democratic Regimes in the 20th Century

International Interdisciplinary Conference
Paris, France
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Eugène Lyons, an American journalist accredited in Moscow in the late 1920s, recalled the regular censorship he encountered as a foreign correspondent there. His testimony not only reveals the direct constraints from the censors, but also the specific practices of reading the Soviet press under state control and the necessity for foreign journalists to master language and behaviour codes in order to exercise their job. In addition to that, it presents the multiple social interactions between rival journalists and censors, and the profile and daily practices of those in charge of censorship (Lyons 1938).

Lyons’ description departs significantly from the wide-spread image of a censor armed with a blue pencil and accomplishing a repressive state power act in a sort of social vacuum. Rather, it invites us to re-examine the censorship of information in non-democratic countries in the 20th century in a broader framework of social history with its focus on actors, their practices and circulations. This gives us a window to explore censorship from “a spectrum of actions that ranges from explicit prohibitions at one end and internalized, unconscious adherence to social norms at the other” (Sherry 2015). By analysing the subject of censorship we can question the very notion of a non-democratic regime that is traditionally defined by contrast to that of a democracy1 thus entailing a binary opposition. Recent studies have challenged this allegedly evident distinction by introducing such notions as “illiberal democracy”2 or “la démocrature”3. These terms were coined in the late 20th century to define the hybrid regimes that can be characterized by some traits inherent to liberal democracies, but at the same time the authoritarian power typical of them conditions their classification as non-democratic.

The focus of our conference on information is conditioned by the state of historiography, which has largely privileged the study of the censorship of cultural production (Biltereyst 2013; Bradley 2010, Goret ongoing thesis)4. Information represents though a major

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2 The term coined by the American political scientist Fareed Zakaria to define the countries in the process of democratization. Fareed Zakaria, « The rise of illiberal democracy », Foreign Affairs, nov./déc. 1997, vol. LXXVI, no 6.
3 The term formed by Pierre Hassner to define the countries in the process of transition from communism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Pierre Grémion et Pierre Hassner, Vents d’Est, Paris, puf, 1990.
4 Cf. In the last years, many conferences were also devoted to this subject: Censures, d’hier à aujourd’hui, Sciences Po, 6-8 février 2014; Regards croisés sur la censure. Les modes de contrôle de la production culturelle sous différents régimes politiques, EHESS, 4 octobre 2017 ; New Perspectives on Censorship under Communism, Oxford, 23 octobre 2015.
issue for a wide spectrum of actors in non-democratic regimes: from governmental bodies to the population in general. Its control is often perceived as a means to legitimize the existing power - to create and impose certain set of references, but it also reveals the attempts to deconstruct official discourses and to get some alternative sources of knowledge. In addition, information coming from or dealing with totalitarian or authoritarian countries is often over politicized and its status is constantly questioned. Such information not only draws much suspicion but also attracts more attention, partly because it may be an indicator of potential changes of regimes, seen as largely different from liberal democracies.

Censorship in non-democratic countries is an old subject of historiography that has been recently revisited by a number of academic works. Having undermined the image of “a unidirectional flow of power from censors to the censored” (Plamper 2001), recent studies have demonstrated the tendency of the depoliticisation of this subject (Peter Molnar 2015). This depoliticisation manifests itself not through the decline of the role played by politics or ideology, but through the growing interest in the functioning of the institutions in charge of censorship, in multiple logics that guide this multi-directional process, in numerous actors concerned: censors, authors or even readers (Bonsayer, Samuel & Gordon 2005, Depretto 2001, Danton 2014, Lynch 1999, Herwig 1987, Hsi Hsuan-Wou & Charles Reeve 2011, Peschanski 1990). These studies have also dealt with the question of the borderlines drawn between different groups of actors, as well as between censored and uncensored objects. Reading habits within the context of censorial constraints (Anghelescu et Poulain 2001) and the parallel processes of production and distribution of writings in the so-called Soviet dissident circles have also been analysed (Oushakine 2001, Komaromi 2012, Yurchak 2013).

These studies have been influenced by the works addressing censorship-like mechanisms in liberal democracies (Billiani 2014, Bourdieu 1982, 1996; Champagne et Marchetti 2002; Laurent 2016), that analyse censorship as a major regulatory mechanism aimed at “setting limits, establishing norms and shaping communication” (Sherry 2015). Although this broader approach presents us some risks of generalization (Post 1998), studying censorship in non-democratic regimes within this framework provides us with a number of advantages. It enables us to question a larger variety of forms, apart from direct intervention of State, that censorship could take; it accentuates dynamics and multidirectional nature of the interactions among different actors (Sherry 2015).

The conference provides the platform for PhD candidates and young researchers working on the subject of censorship in non-democratic regimes in the 20th century to engage in a transdisciplinary dialogue, to draw comparisons and parallels, and to contribute to the current theoretical debates. Given that the subject of censorship in cultural domain has been largely covered by the academic publications, the discussions for our conference will rather focus on the subject of the production, circulation and consumption of the information.

In this context the following questions could be raised, but not limited to:

**Section 1: Methodological problems**
It aims at studying the variety of terms (censorship, control, regulation, limited circulation, etc.) and the way they are used. It will include analyses of theoretical and archival instruments adapted when studying censorship, self-censorship, workarounds, etc., as well as of the difficulties related to this kind of analysis.
Section 2: Actors and mechanisms
Who are the actors targeted by censorship depending on historical, political and geographical contexts? Are they always aware of being subjects to censorship? And if they are not, are they able to reinforce it? What are the exact mechanisms of censorship, the ways to escape it, as well the factors that influence these processes? To what extent is it possible to speak of the final product (a literary work, a text, a manifest, etc.) as of the result of co-production?

Section 3: Censorship and circulation of the information
The processes of production and circulation of the information are indissolubly linked to their political, economic and cultural contexts, as well as to the processes of transfers and circulation of the information on the international scale. How is the circulated information influenced and transformed in various milieus it is passing through? What are the geopolitical and symbolic borders crossed as a result of those circulations? What are the mechanisms of censorship and appropriation applied to the transferred information?

Organizing committee:
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Scientific board:
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Calendar:
The application of 4000 signs maximum (in French or in English) and short CV are to be emailed to censure.colloque@gmail.com before July 10, 2020.
The results of the selection will be communicated by July 24, 2020.
All selected candidates are kindly asked to email the texts of their presentations (from 20 000 to 40 000 signs) to the organizing committee before August 24, 2020.

Practical information:
Languages of the conference: French and English
Place of the conference: Sciences Po, Paris.
Given the current health crisis, the conference might be partially held via video-conference.

Bibliography: