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Paolo Sarpi, the Papal Index and Censorship

Federico Barbierato

Besides (said Becatelli) there is no need of bookes, the world hath too many already, especially since printing was invented: and it is better to forbid a 1000 bookes without cause, then permit one that deserveth prohibition. ... Fryar Gregorie, Generall of the Heremite, said, he did not think it necessary to observe so many subtleties. For the prohibition of a Book, is as the prohibition of a meate, which is not a sentence against it, nor against him that hath prepared it, but a precept to him that is to use it, made by him who hath the charge of his health; therefore the credit of the Victualer is not in question, but the benefit of the sicke, who is forbid to eate of a meat that is hurtfull to him, though in it selfe, it may be good. So the Synod, as a Physitian, ought to forbid that which is hurtfull, or dangerous to the faithfull; wherein none will receive wrong. For howsoever the booke may bee good in it selfe, yet peradventure it may not agree to the infirmitie of the minds of this age.¹

These are the words, in translation, of Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623), the Servite friar who was a legal and theological consultant to the Republic of Venice.² They are taken from Sarpi's prohibited book *The History of the Council of Trent*, first printed in Italian in London in 1619 and translated into English a year later. The manuscript of the work had been transcribed in Venice and arrived in London in a complicated way via cooperation between merchants, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, and the English Ambassador in Venice, Sir Henry Wotton.³

Sarpi's *History* had an explosive impact in Reformed Europe. His role extended beyond that of an analyst – he was depicted holding a pen like a knife and was dubbed 'the disemboweller of the Council of Trent'.⁴ After publication in May 1619, the book was unsurprisingly placed in the *Index of Prohibited Books* on 22 November. Published under the pseudonym of

Pietro Soave Polano, an anagram of Paolo Sarpi Veneto, it was arguably the most important, clearest and most devastating critique of papal power that had ever been produced in the Catholic sphere, an effective weapon against Roman pretensions that provided a fundamental critical basis in the Gallican Church. However, Sarpi's writing met with most success in England, where it had been hoped that Venice would sensationally break away from the Church of Rome to create an independent structure similar to the Anglican Church. The concept of the civil function of religion later played a role, for example, in the Erastian approach and Hobbes's *Leviathan*. But it was on Milton that Sarpi probably exerted most influence on English shores, notably in terms of the role of censorship, discussed in book VI of *History*, though his *History of the Inquisition* provided equally important inspiration for *Areopagitica*. Although written confidentially for the government of the Republic, *History of the Inquisition* was distributed quite widely and translated into English by Robert Gentilis in 1639.⁵

While this led to an image of Sarpi as a champion of freedom of the press, his position was actually less clearly defined, sometimes ambiguous and always tied up in the historical context.⁶ The background setting was the split dividing Europe caused by the Reformation and the attempt to react through the Council of Trent. When Sarpi wrote the passage quoted above, he was implicitly referring not only to the Trent debate, but also to at least fifty years of discussions about censorship, how to apply it and which texts to ban. His basic assumption reflected the view that the Council had distanced the Church from its original mission and definitively sanctioned its wrongful interference in the field of civil power; the Council fathers had mixed up the cities of God and man in their thinking with devastating effects for Catholicism.

The main long-term directives of Catholic censorship had been drawn up during the sixteenth century. The first official Roman *Index* was promulgated in 1559, the result of ten years of work by the Roman Inquisition and the strong repressive will of Pope Paul IV, a former Grand Inquisitor. The condemnations – a thousand in total – were extremely harsh and the application of the *Index* was wholly entrusted to the network of inquisitorial courts in Italian states. Confessors played an important role, since they could not absolve the owners of prohibited books or those who simply knew somebody that read them. As penitents had to clear themselves by reporting the offender to the Sant'Uffizio, confessors became a kind of offshoot of the latter, engaged in the struggle against prohibited books in their 'internal court'. The Pauline *Index* paved the way for future versions by banning non-Catholic authors,

even if their individual works did not include sufficient references to religion to condemn them on this ground alone. It also banned authors who were 'not congruent' with religious and moral precepts, anonymous works – instantly deemed dangerous – and the entire output of certain printers. Another class of prohibition was '*libri omnes*', cumulative condemnations against entire categories of books whose level of danger had to be established by individual inquisitors.

Bans affected works written in the vernacular above all; as Cardinal Carlo Borromeo wrote about the text of the Bible in 1582, there was a risk of 'the mysteries of Holy Scripture' being 'indifferently read and examined by all people; then that, due to their stature, and the inexperience of many, simple souls can easily fall into error, and remain oppressed'.⁷ Indeed, vernacular translations of the Bible were absent from the list of permitted reading for a long time, at least in Italy and Spain. However, the interdictions did not only concern works of a religious or doctrinal nature, but all written production, of which the Inquisition was the only judge. In this way, condemnations were meted out to Aretino and Rabelais for their obscenity, Machiavelli for his anticurialism, the *Decameron* for its immorality and so on with much of the sixteenth-century vernacular output. Ultimately, any work that could cause intellectual anxiety was identified as dangerous; it was no longer simply a question of doctrinal heresy. As Archbishop Beccadelli claimed, when in doubt, it was better to ban 1,000 innocuous books than allow one dangerous book to be published (474).

The 1559 *Index* also raised the question of expurgation procedures. The inclusion of a huge number of literary works implicitly posed a significant problem: was it possible to impose a total ban on reading Boccaccio, Berni, Pulci, Lando, Della Casa, Aretino, Bracciolini and similar authors? With regard to the grey areas of censorship, there was growing interest in the idea that certain works could be 'saved' from interdiction by being amended to varying degrees.

The Tridentine *Index* was promulgated in 1564, drawn up by a commission of bishops appointed within the Council of Trent, whose debates were referred to by Sarpi in the initial quotation above. The new *Index* stressed that it was possible to modify some texts – indicated as *donec corrigantur* or *donec expurgantur* – and allow them to be read after correction. In this way, certain works – including those by Erasmus – that had been included in the first category in the 1559 *Index* had some chance of limited distribution. In general, the new instrument was characterized by a certain degree of clemency; the

condemnations were more or less the same, but the general overview changed, with the establishment of ten rules of prohibition that broadly characterized Catholic censorship over the following four centuries. Bans were handed out to all heretical or superstitious texts, all New Testament editions by heretics and obscene books, except for the ancient classics. The seventh rule wholly proscribed ‘those books that explicitly treat, relate or teach lascivious or obscene matter’.⁸ There were still three categories, as in the previous *Index*, but some authors moved from the first to the second group, so that only certain works were banned rather than their entire production. The condemnation of heretical authors also now only affected works of a religious and faith-based nature, instead of all their works indiscriminately. Nevertheless, works of heresiarchs were subject to a total ban.

The Tridentine *Index* was reprinted several times and officially remained in force until 1596. Although it was not always enforced with the same level of rigour, the situation started to change in 1565 with the election of Pius V. The new pope had been General Commissioner of the Congregation of the Sant’Uffizio and had also been involved in drawing up the 1559 *Index*. The return to the spirit of the latter was marked in 1567 by a definitive ban on printing vernacular editions of the Bible, which had started again after the Council. Pius V set up a special Congregation in 1571 with the aim of drawing up a new catalogue, and the Congregation of the *Index* was officially founded in the following year.

After a long and tortuous preparation period, Clement VIII promulgated the new *Index* in 1596. It was probably the greatest single effort implemented by Rome to combat the spread of books deemed dangerous. At the same time, it marked the moment of transition from a flexible phase for drawing up rules, which might remain subject to ongoing debate, to a phase where the rules were consolidated and systematically enforced. Unlike the two previous indices – the first compiled by the Inquisition and the second by a special congregation of bishops appointed by the Council of Trent – the Clementine *Index* was the fruit of the labours of the newly created Congregation of the *Index*, initially assisted by the Sant’Uffizio and the Master of the Sacred Palace. The Congregation had been at work for 25 years, taking account of the experience of half a century of censorship practice. Open opposition came from Savoy, and indeed from Venice, where it was only accepted after lengthy diplomatic negotiations ending in an agreement that to some degree safeguarded jurisdiction in the Veneto and the printing industry.

Although it was presented almost as a supplement to the 1564 *Index*, the Clementine *Index* recaptured the severity and spirit of the 1559 Pauline

Index, to which an appendix was also added containing the prohibition of the complete works of 682 authors (including Rabelais and Aretino), 185 individual titles by named authors, and 276 anonymous works. A total of 116 authors and titles – such as Folengo – were provisionally banned awaiting expurgation, which in some cases replaced absolute interdiction in the previous *Index*. Works published after 1564 were added and the ten Tridentine rules were supplemented by some directives on the prohibition, correction and printing of books. Collected in an *Instructio*, they formulated, reaffirmed or clarified the previous rules and acted as guidelines over the following decades. There were some liberal elements, especially with regard to humanism and literary production, but these were compensated for by a series of somewhat harsh regulations, above all the rule whereby booksellers had to swear compliance with the provisions of the *Index* before a bishop or inquisitor, undertaking not to accept those suspected of heresy in their profession. In this way, as booksellers and printers had to swear an oath to a non-secular authority, they became papal subjects. Furthermore, the *Instructio* contained inflexible clarification of previous condemnations, including those regarding astrological literature, the *Talmud* and Jewish texts in general, and vernacular translations of the Bible, the latter thanks to the work of the Sant'Uffizio. However, papal nuncios were granted a certain degree of flexibility in banning the Bible in the vernacular immediately after promulgation. This discretion was implemented above all in areas such as Bohemia, Poland and Dalmatia, where Catholics lived in close contact with Protestants.

Furthermore, the category of censored books included not only *donec corrigantur*, pending revision, but also works by authors that had not been declared heretics, or works by heretical authors which did not deal with religion and, due to their technical character, were in demand in universities or professions. The eighteen Clementine rules *de prohibitione*, *de correctione* and *de impressione librorum* also definitively established the characteristics of censorship intervention, at the same time increasing the number of works subject to revision. The *donec corrigantur* category was retained, but was only used to designate a scant number of explicitly mentioned volumes. Most books were covered by general rules, whether from Trent or *de correctione librorum* in the new *Index*, increasing the propositions and subjects that were held to clash with faith and morality and could therefore scandalize Catholics. As rule VIII stated, books whose principal argument was good could just be expurgated of any specific content amounting to heresy, impiety, divination or superstition. No literary genre outside the theological field was spared from this extension of censorship intervention.⁹

Moreover, as Antonio Possevino stated in *La coltura de gl'ingegni* (1598, a translation of the first book of *Bibliotheca selecta* from 1593), 'purgation' was required to 'remove sinister feelings and intelligence, heresy and dishonesty and obscene things'.¹⁰ It did not matter where they were found and, most importantly, it was not only a question of suppressing sentences or words deemed dangerous by making cuts of varying sizes. Indeed, the operation became more complex when entire passages essentially had to be rewritten to instil orthodoxy, or when it involved distributing works conveying opposite messages to the author's original intentions. To this end, Sarpi underlined that any amendment to an author's thinking was more serious than prohibiting it completely: 'writings... have been changed to the opposite of what the author meant through additions, subtractions and other alterations'.¹¹

The 1596 *Index* probably represented the pinnacle of the Church's attempt to control consciences by prohibiting or neutralizing books, marking a turning point with regard to publishing output. The boundaries of Catholic censorship were clearly defined and there was a widespread idea that only a limited group of the faithful should have direct access to books, especially those in the vernacular. As Pope Clement VII had said, the others would have to make do with saying rosaries.

Sarpi's attack in the passage from *History of the Council of Trent* quoted above seems to be clear, articulated with rhetorical irony towards the Council fathers (474–475). There was a long tradition of the motif of prohibiting food because of its potential effects; it expressed one of the most unbearably patronizing features of the Church of Rome in the eyes of the Reformed churches. However, it is an attack that in some way conceals Sarpi's deep-rooted idea of censorship. As he wrote in a well-known passage in *History of the Inquisition*, 'The matter of bookes seemes to be a thing of small moment, because it treats of words, but through these words comes opinions into the world, which cause partialities, seditions, and finally warres. They are words, it is true, but such as in consequence draw after them Hosts of armed men'.¹²

It is a fundamental passage because it shows Sarpi as anything but 'liberal' with regard to texts. He saw some books as dangerous, meriting restricted distribution as they could be seditious and spread dissent. Others were prohibited by the Church to disproportionately extend its sphere of influence over the secular government. The state needed to act to halt this ecclesiastical 'deviation' and limit it within its boundaries.¹³

Therefore, Sarpi felt that the main problem was not so much the need for censorship as the extent to which censorship should apply, which texts should

be banned and who should act as the censoring body. From this point of view, papal censorship was understandable and justifiable; in his opinion there was originally no form of prohibition in the church except what was self-imposed by the pious fathers. Councils could therefore recommend avoiding certain books, but it was up to emperors and popes to prohibit them officially. However, these prohibitions should have been exceptional cases, whereas instead they were increasing uncontrollably. Above all, censorship was a danger when used for political ends. Sarpi felt that the prohibition of books was increasingly affecting works through which the secular authority could defend itself against interference from the Church. The problem was therefore primarily jurisdictional in nature and not so closely related to the relative lawfulness of the practice of censorship.

Sarpi's attack started to take shape as soon as censorship was used as an instrument of political aggression by popes against state structures and secular authorities. It prompted him to write that 'a better mystery was never found, then to use religion to make men insensible' (473). He also saw it as evident that the *Index of Prohibited Books* contained a growing number of books unrelated to doctrinal or heretical issues.¹⁴ The Church was therefore increasingly operating in the field of the state, acting not only to prohibit, but also to expurgate: 'They have gelded the bookes of ancient Authors by new printing of them, and taken out all which might serve for Temporall Authority.'¹⁵

The ambiguity of Sarpi's position can be understood most clearly in his *Consulti* – 'opinions' voiced to the government of the Venetian republic regarding individual issues. Sarpi's political nature is more apparent in these, emphasizing the importance of intervention against certain types of books and the opportuneness of allowing others to be distributed. In this sense, Sarpi has a pragmatic attitude – it is pointless, for example, to only consider the past, as he wrote in his *Consulto* 'On prohibiting pernicious books to the good government' on 17 August 1615: 'When new dangers are discovered, new ways of defending oneself need to be found.' Sarpi claimed that the interests of inquisitors and the state had coincided until around fifty years previously, because 'the inquisitors made sure that things against religion or the good government were not printed'. However, matters had changed by 1615, when he was writing what would become *History of the Council of Trent*: 'The government today can no longer trust the inquisitors as before, as they have totally conflicting interests. However, the prince needs to have his own censorship structure.'¹⁶

These were therefore positions that could vary over time – during Rome's Interdict against Venice and what is called the 'war of writings', the

opportuneness of distributing books was evaluated on a case-by-case basis, just like the evaluation process to decide if it was opportune to respond to writing attacking the government that slipped through the censorship net. This shows one of the fundamental characteristics of the long-term effects on Catholic culture, especially in Italy. Nobody questioned the system of censorship, due to the shared premise that knowledge should be denied to the majority and reserved to extremely small groups that could manage the explosive nature of liberty. The problem was not whether prohibition was appropriate, but who to include in this highly select community. This had a negative effect on social harmony, which only ended when the ties between repressive structures and dominant classes became even closer. Therefore, the way in which censorship worked established an integrated 'system' of mediation, attitudes and relations with power structures that are still surprisingly entrenched.¹⁷