

Freedom of Speech: Quo Vadis

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Theme: [History](#)

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In brief opening remarks this morning I brought up the crucial fact that rights are typically not granted, but rather won, by dedicated and informed popular struggle. That includes the core principle of freedom of speech. Recognition of this fact should, I think, be taken as a guide when we are considering how we can proceed on many fronts: in countering the current waves of repression worldwide, in carrying forward the gains that have been achieved and that are now under attack, and in the more visionary mode that was suggested by the organizers of the conference, thinking about vistas that lie ahead after that still remote day when proper standards of defense of freedom of speech are established, and once established, observed.

I also mentioned that the United States and Turkey, though differing in many respects, provide clear and instructive illustrations of the ways in which rights are won and once won, protected. With regard to the United States, it is commonly believed that the right to freedom of speech and press was guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution over two centuries ago. That is true only to quite a limited extent, first because of its wording, but more importantly because the law in practice is what the Courts decide – and what the public is willing to defend. I will return to this tomorrow, but would just like to point out now that it was not until the 1960s that the US courts took a strong stand protecting freedom of speech. They did so under the pressure of the civil rights movement and other activism over a wide front. And with the decline of activism, the rights are being eroded, as we heard today, another topic I would like to return to tomorrow.

Such facts as these open a question about freedom of speech that arises when we consider longer-term objectives. The question I have in mind is by no means new. One person who raised it was George Orwell, who is best known for his critique of totalitarian enemies, but was no less acid in addressing the ills of his own society. One pertinent example is an essay on what he called “literary censorship in England.” The essay was written as the introduction to *Animal Farm*, his biting satire of Stalinist crimes. In this introductory essay Orwell instructs his British audience that they should not feel too complacent about his exposure of the crimes of Stalinism. In free England, he writes, ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. He gives some examples, and only a few sentences of explanation, but they capture important truths. “The sinister fact about literary censorship in England,” Orwell wrote, “is that it is largely voluntary. Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for any official ban.” One reason is the centralization of the press in the hands of “wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain important topics.” Another, and I think more important reason, is a good education and immersion in the dominant intellectual culture, which instills in us a “general tacit agreement that ‘it wouldn’t do’ to mention that particular fact.”

The introductory essay is not well-known, unlike the book itself, a bitter condemnation of Soviet tyranny that is famous and read everywhere. The reason is that it was not published, perhaps confirming his thesis about literary censorship in free England. It was found many years later in his unpublished writings. The essential point is that even in some future time when rights are established and the rights on paper truly observed, new and crucial questions arise.

A little historical perspective is useful. A century ago, in the more free societies it was becoming more difficult to control the population by force. Labor unions were being formed, along with labor-based parliamentary parties; the franchise was extending; and popular movements were resisting arbitrary authority, not for the first time to be sure, but with a wider base and greater success. In the most free societies, England and the US, dominant sectors were coming to recognize that to maintain their control they would have to shift from force to other means, primarily control of attitudes and opinion. Prominent intellectuals called for the development of effective propaganda to impose on the vulgar masses “necessary illusions” and “emotionally potent oversimplifications.” It would be necessary, they urged, to devise means of “manufacture of consent” to ensure that the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders,” the general population, be kept “in their place,” as “spectators,” not “participants in action,” so that the small privileged group of “responsible men” would be able to form policy undisturbed by the “rage and trampling of the bewildered herd.” I am quoting from the most respected progressive public intellectuals in the US in the 20th century, Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr, both Wilson-Roosevelt-Kennedy liberals, the latter president Obama’s favorite philosopher.

At the same time the huge public relations industry began to develop, devoted to the same ends. In the words of its leaders, also from the liberal end of the spectrum, the industry must direct the general population to the “superficial things of life, like fashionable consumption” so that the “intelligent minority” will be free to determine the proper course of policy.

These concerns are persistent. The democratic uprising of the 1960s was frightening to elite opinion. Intellectuals from Europe, the US, and Japan called for an end to the “excess of democracy.” The population must be returned to apathy and passivity, and in particular sterner measures must be imposed by the institutions responsible for “the indoctrination of the young”: the schools, universities, churches. I am quoting from the liberal internationalist end of the spectrum, those who staffed the Carter administration in the United States and their counterparts elsewhere in the industrial democracies. The right called for far harsher measures. Major efforts were soon undertaken to reduce the threat of democracy, with a certain degree of success. We are now living in that era.

Reflection on such matters should bring us to the realization that beyond the hard task of establishing rights of free expression, and defending their formal establishment of these rights, there are still challenging mountain peaks to climb.

Turning to Turkey, the immediate tasks are much more difficult. Five years ago, I was asked to submit a comment for a conference on freedom of expression here. I would like to reiterate some of what I said, which seems to me important to keep in mind. Turkey has its share of extremely serious human rights violations, including major crimes. There is no need

for me to elaborate on that after today's discussion. But Turkey also has a remarkable tradition of resistance to these crimes. That includes, first and foremost, the victims, who refuse to submit and continue to struggle for their rights, with courage and dedication that can only inspire humility among people who enjoy privilege and security. But beyond that - and here Turkey has an unusual and perhaps unique place in the world - these struggles are joined by prominent writers, artists, journalists, publishers, academics and others, who not only protest state crimes, but go far beyond to constant acts of resistance, risking and sometimes enduring severe punishment. There is nothing like that in the West.

When I visit Europe, and hear self-righteous charges that Turkey is not yet fit to join the enlightened company of the European Union, I often feel, and say, that it may be the other way around, particularly in defense of freedom of speech, a record of which Turkey should be very proud, and from which we can all learn a great deal.

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Noam Chomsky is the author of numerous best-selling political works. His latest books are Failed States, The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy and What We Say Goes, a conversation book with David Barsamian, both in the American Empire Project series at Metropolitan Books. The Essential Chomsky (edited by Anthony Arnove), a collection of his writings on politics and on language from the 1950s to the present, has just been published by the New Press .

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