

Liberalism Series - Abstracts

"Freedom of Speech and the American Tradition"

Morris Ernst - December 10, 1934

All censorship is based on fear. In the history of America this fear can first be traced in the religious intolerance of the Puritans and other religious sects. Prejudices inherited from the medieval church may be found in many statute books, ridiculous cases, delightful cases, but with the dwindling of religious fervor there arose another form of censorship, more prevalent in Europe than in America---the censorship of the divine right of kings. Our government has, however, been opposed to all such restriction. In fact it has positively supported criticism and on one occasion Congress declared it illegal to prevent the dissemination of abolitionist literature.

Around 1870 there arose a new prejudice, the fear of sex. Congress passed obscenity statutes limiting the use of the mails to clean literature. America wished to protect its women. For forty odd years a struggle was maintained for purity in print, then about 1915 the tide turned. Women demanded freedom now, not protection. The mails remained censored.

Censorship has now become a matter of taste, not of morals. That it has had little effect on the life of the country is evident. Despite our much vaunted puritanism our civilization contains the worst factors of the civilizations of the Greeks and the Jews. Preaching and laws seem to have little effect on the masses. Censorship, being a matter of taste, is patently unbalanced. Many tales may be told of the stupidity and narrowness of those men into whose hands has been placed the right to censor and of the ridiculous untimely banning of certain books and magazines.

Sex and the new economic order are directly connected for the radicals of America fear obscenity as the main grounds of political attack. As a group they seem to prefer the soap box to the newspaper or radio whose value for

spreading ideas they do not fully appreciate.

When the broadcasting privileges were being granted, the liberals tried to give them to non-profit searching enterprises. They did not succeed but they did procure a ruling, giving equal opportunities to all political candidates to be heard over the air. This did not create as great a furor as might be imagined but if the radio is liberal in this respect it is limited ridiculously along other lines connected with taste.

The press is theoretically free, but only the small town newspapers are uncensored. To begin with the average wage of a reporter for the first twenty years is forty dollars a week. These reporters are in constant fear of losing their jobs. Recently William Randolph Hearst virtually threatened the government if the N R A did not uphold his decision in regard to an ex-reporter, Dean Jennings. A newspaper strike which in any other field would be front page news is rarely mentioned. There is no solution to these problems and only a little device may be suggested to limit the freedom of the heads of a newspaper to control the policies for personal gain. Make them print and publish a complete account of their private wealth and interests. But the small group and they alone are free to cry out against the suppression of censorship--and they should shout if the left wing movement of this country does not speak we may swing far to the right--another labor disturbance--troops sent to bring the milk to town and there will be fascism in America, a mild, un-European form but still fascism.

By controlling the radio, the press, the speech of the people through the censorship of obscenity the government has been given the power to deceive. A good government does not deceive its supported but even in liberty there is bound to be deception.

One must learn to rely on one's philosophy so that one does not need the aid of freedom of press and speech and the movies.

Sylvie Redmond