

Book review of *Dangerous Ideas: A Brief History of Censorship in the West*, by Eric Berkowitz. Beacon Press, 2022.

It is good that Eric Berkowitz's important book on the history of censorship includes a section on the shameful 1873 Comstock laws. For several decades, these U.S. laws censored "lascivious obscenity" including books, illustrations, sex toys, abortion and birth control devices. However, unmentioned by Berkowitz is the current campaign of the U.S. government to censor depictions of unclothed bodies and erotic interactions involving any person below age 18.

At least Anthony Comstock only burned things in his zeal to "suppress vice." Today's censors not only destroy all photographs, artistic depictions and even cartoons that suggest individuals below that crucial age, but the U.S. government also imprisons hundreds of thousands of persons, for many years, merely for exchanging unclothed photos of themselves with their friends.

What we are seeing right now are two current trends. First, the development of the internet has allowed people across the globe easily to send artistic images or photographs of themselves. Humans love to engage in such image sharing, and never before in human history have individuals had the ability to exchange erotic images and ideas so widely. As reviewer Ariel Dorfman notes, the invention of the internet is bringing "seismic alterations in the nature of information and its transmission, akin to what happened after the invention of the printing press."

Second, while the forces of censorship have irrevocably lost the culture war over pornography, they have made a strategic retreat, and no longer harp on this common behavior among adults. Instead, they focus specifically on denying the right of young people to look at such images. In the name of "protecting children," censors inflict permanent harm on

innumerable young people with the scarlet letters “sex offender” legally imposed on them for the remainder of their life. President George W. Bush is the person mainly responsible for instituting this state apparatus to imprison sex offenders for exceptionally long sentences. But President Barack Obama expanded the program, even signing a law stamping those damning words on the U.S. passports of people with a sex charge. An entire generation is being criminalized.

This repressive campaign is a political act, enforcing an evangelical Christian view that nudity should be prohibited to people below age 18. There are few signs the current hysteria is abating, even though statistical evidence suggests little or no harm results from kids viewing sexual acts. Millions of youths around the world sneak a peek at such images, subjecting themselves to the real harm of state violence being used against them.

Unfortunately, this kind of punishment is nothing new. As Berkowitz noted, millions of writers and artists have had to suffer the torments inflicted by governing powers and religious institutions since ancient times. We can at least take comfort in role models like Margaret Sanger, who was arrested for publishing a column for girls about birth control. One of the most influential women of the 20th century, she never gave up, but founded Planned Parenthood, worked to abolish laws criminalizing birth control, and sponsored medical research that invented the birth control pill.

There comes a time, however, where inspired resistance is not the best response. Dorfman’s view that going into exile is almost as bad as being censored is not really accurate, if a person’s hesitancy to escape results in that person being imprisoned for many years, or being executed. Look, for example, at the three main reactions of European Jews after 1938. The first group

denied the reality of the threat that Nazis posed, and kept silent in hopes that they would not attract attention. Their silence did not protect them, and most of them died in the concentration camps. The second group realized the seriousness of the fascist threat, and determined to resist at all costs. Most of these resistance fighters were killed. The third group recognized the lethal threat of Nazism, but determined to do whatever it would take to escape to other nations. Those who escaped were the survivors. When things get really bad, the historical record suggests, the rational response of those who are persecuted is to flee into exile if there is an opportunity to escape.

Still, it is comforting that Berkowitz concludes “censorship is ultimately futile and cannot permanently extinguish the thirst for freedom of expression.” This knowledge is inspiring, but while it may be correct that freedom of expression ultimately wins, individual lives can most certainly be destroyed. The best advice is for people to preserve their life, however one can, and then live to fight another day.

RESOURCES ON CENSORSHIP

J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Ariel Dorfman, “The Futility of Censorship,” *New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2022, pp.32-34.

Susan Nossel, *Dare to Speak: Defending Free Speech for All*. Dey Street Press, 2020

PEN America, *Freedom to Write Report*.