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Journal for Research and Debate

modalities of censorship in history production

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Censorship is a complex and contested phenomenon. In this paper, I examine one domain in which censorship is ubiquitous: the production of history. I proceed in three steps. First, I outline ongoing debates over definitions of censorship and free speech, analyzing the differences between 'old' and 'new' censorship theory and suggesting the usefulness of Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games' in analyzing the gap between them. Moreover, I point to the, ironic, 'Western imprint' on most censorship theory. Second, I draw out some of the different modalities of censorship of history production by examining the works of Antoon de Baets and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. I argue that, although they can be read as exponents of 'old' and 'new' censorship theory respectively, their theories are more complex and at times intersect. I suggest that a dialogic reading, acknowledging the different epistemological assumptions that constitute their respective points of departure, can be productive in analyzing the different modalities of censorship in history production. Finally, I reflect on a set of recently formulated 'good practices' to counter censorship of history production, including integrity and professional solidarity. I conclude by arguing that these practices overlook the pervasive coloniality of historical knowledge production and the inherently censorial force of the historian and the historical field. My examples throughout the paper will come, in line with this special issue's focus, from history education.

Keywords: censorship of history production, coloniality of knowledge, free speech, History education, new censorship theory

Introduction

Censorship is a complex and contested phenomenon.[1] The term itself denotes and interacts with various societal processes. When defined as the suppression of speech and writing, a disputed position as I will show below, its effects can be paradoxical: on the one hand, censorship is often among the first words to be censored (Scammell, 1988); on the other, as Romila Thapar (2019) pointedly observes, "banning a book ensures a striking increase in readership" (p. 302). When, alternatively, censorship is conceptualized more broadly, it has the potential to appear in all the cracks and crevices of communication and to become a constitutive feature of life itself (cf., Roßbach, 2024, p. 16).

In this paper, I will focus on one domain in which censorship is ubiquitous: the production of history. I will proceed in three steps. First, I will outline ongoing debates over definitions of censorship, including the recent renewed attention to definitions of free speech. Second, I will draw out some of the different modalities of censorship of history production by examining the works of Antoon de Baets and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Their separate works can be read as exponents of a 'restrictive' and 'constitutive' approach respectively, but as I will try to show are in fact much more

complicated and at times can be brought into dialogue. A note of caution, censorship of history—like censorship in general—is contextual: it neither appears nor plays out the same ways in different circumstances and in different times. The subtleties of its global varieties, therefore, extend far beyond the scope of this paper and deserve separate study (e.g., De Baets, 2001; Candea et al., 2025; Network of Concerned Historians, n.d.). Finally, I will reflect on a set of recently formulated 'good practices' to counter censorship of history production and argue that they overlook the pervasive coloniality of historical knowledge production. My examples throughout the paper will come, in line with this special issue's focus, from history education.

Censorship, Old and New

Scholarship on censorship is usually categorized into two approaches. The first—'restrictive,' 'negative,' 'repressive,' 'regulatory'—was until the 1980s the dominant understanding. Rooted in (liberal) ideas of free speech, civil society and the marketplace of ideas, and a tradition of resistance against political and religious authorities often traced back to the (French) Enlightenment, this approach posits censorship as the systematic and intentional violation by state or state-like actors of fundamental rights (predominantly of freedom of expression and freedom of information). Its normativity and didactics are clear-cut, summarized pointedly by Robert Darnton (2014) as the struggle of "the children of light against the children of darkness," making it well-suited for political action and legal application (p. 17).

The second approach perceives censorship as more diffuse. Variously called 'constitutive,' 'structural,' 'productive' or 'prescriptive,' its advocates do not consider censorship an infringement on free speech, an authoritarian exception to an ideal society, but rather as an elementary feature of communication, or even the human condition. "To be for or against censorship," in the words of Michael Holquist (1994), "assumes a freedom no one has. Censorship is." (p. 16) What can and cannot be said, written or performed is, in this understanding, the result of an assemblage of personal and structural forces of which state and state-like actors are only one. Intellectually, it borrows explicitly from Foucault, Bourdieu and Butler. Implicitly, it often borrows from Marxist analyses of ideology and hegemony (Bunn, 2015).

Over the past forty years, these differences have proven hard to bridge. In a book-length study of censorship, Darnton (2014) has argued that both approaches "can be reconciled by … elevating them to another level of analysis" (p. 19), by practicing the method of 'thick description,' but subsequently analyzes three case studies of state-led restrictive censorship and concludes, undermining the short-lived attempt at reconciliation, that "censorship as I understand it is essentially political" (p. 235). He, moreover, reiterates the common misunderstanding that a constitutive approach extends the concept to a point where it becomes analytically useless; if everything is censorship, so this argument goes, nothing is censorship. This mistakenly conflates omnipresence with uniformity: if censorship is everywhere and everywhere the same, it simply becomes an underlying existent upon which analysis takes place; but if it operates differently depending on social, political, temporal and geographical contexts, then rather than becoming analytically useless it shifts the object of analysis from *what* censorship is, to *how* it operates. Decades of scholarship on Foucauldian power are indicative of the important difference between omnipresence and uniformity in analyzing the intersections of knowledge and power.

Foucault simultaneously poses a well-recognized challenge to those claiming to work in his tradition, since he himself rarely employed censorship as an analytical category. For Beate Müller,

this indicates that Foucault saw no use for the term in examining the interplay of forces involved in the 'incitement to discourse' already covered by the category of power. She uses this observation, somewhat contradictorily, to simultaneously argue for analytically separating censorship from proximate concepts—like (professional) self-regulation, canonization and social control—and for approaching censorship as denoting a family resemblance that changes shape depending on appearances and contexts (Müller, 2004; cf., Rosenfeld, 2001).[2]

Noteworthily, Müller overlooks Wittgenstein's intuitively more relevant idea of 'language games,' which suggests a shift of analysis from how censorship is defined, to how a particular definition is used and operates within an intellectual project. For example, a legal scholar may require clearer terminological boundaries than a historian linking the foregrounding of histories of the French Enlightenment to the symbolic importance of free speech for Europe's secular-liberal self-image (cf., Asad, 2013). A similar logic extends to professional differences, where for many historians and anthropologists a "diversity of visions and versions … [is] not a definitional issue to be resolved but the starting point of further investigation" (Candea et al., 2025, pp. 13–14).

The debate over censorship is further complicated by the fact that, in the words of Matthew Bunn (2015), "the true challenge of New Censorship Theory is not in questioning the validity of our concept of censorship, but rather in relativizing the meaning of censorship's opposite, freedom of speech" (p. 43). Freedom of speech, as Teresa Bejan (2019) has recently highlighted, can be understood in at least two different ways: *parrhesia* (παρρησία), or the license to speak one's mind freely and without constraint; and *isegoria* (ἰσηγορία), or "the equal right of citizens to participate in public debate" (p. 97). In a follow-up essay, Bejan (2021) specified the tensions between the two, where "[*parrhesia*] describes a principle of frankness grounded in the freedom of thought … [while *isegoria*], by contrast, asserts a claim to address others publicly and discursively, and thus in turn involves a further claim to their attention and consideration" (p. 154). This claim to attention and equal access to a public sphere is gaining increased prominence in the face of algorithmically driven social media (cf., Candea et al., 2025; Adriaansen, in press).

Finally, this tension between *parrhesia* and *isegoria* can also be seen within the censorship debate. The counterforce to *isegoria*, the right to participate in public debate, is what Gayatri Spivak (1999) has aptly called 'sanctioned ignorance,' the ways in which the right to inscribe and re-inscribe meaning onto the world are afforded to some while others are made and kept voiceless. It is at least ironic that a scholarly debate so occupied with the ways in which discourse is made possible, has often participated in its own canon formation—unable or unwilling to question its own 'transparency' (Spivak, 1988).

Censorship of History Production

There is no reason to believe that censorship in the domain of history production is any more or less diverse and frequent than it is in other domains of knowledge. That said, there is a variety of particular conditions under which history is produced and under which it operates within societies: historians ascribe meaning and significance retrospectively, their work is limited by archives with histories of their own, and although many historians continue to believe that a past 'exists' waiting to be 'found,' few would deny that the historian's questions, sources, methods, interpretative frameworks and analytical vocabularies are at least in part shaped by what we might call the historian's 'subjectivity' (e.g., Danto, 1985; Van den Akker, 2018).

Moreover, history holds a peculiar sway over human existence: it contributes, in a wide range of different ways, to various kinds of identity formations. Furthermore, it interacts and shapes the ways in which people make sense of their existence in the world and their relations to different peoples, whether living, dead or not-yet-born. And, of particular interest for this journal, it plays a central and highly contested role in the education of a society's youth. In the words of Michael Apple (1991), history textbooks "help set the canons of truthfulness and, as such, also help re-create a major reference point for what knowledge, culture, belief, and reality really are" (p. 4).

These conditions are reflected in how history production is censored. For the remainder of this paper, I will focus on two theoreticians of censorship of history: Antoon de Baets and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Their theories can be read as 'restrictive' and 'constitutive' respectively, but, as I hope to show, I believe their arguments are more complicated and, although they operate within different sets of assumptions and intellectual traditions, at times intersect. By outlining their overlaps and differences, I hope they can help further the study of censorship of history both theoretically and empirically.

Censorship, Self-Censorship and Historical Propaganda

Antoon De Baets (2011) positions his research on censorship explicitly in relation to legal definitions and a "restrictive" approach (p. 55). Yet his definition is more complicated than some New Censorship theorists would make it seem. For example, whereas Bunn (2015) summarizes the 'liberal conception of censorship' as "external, coercive, and repressive" (p. 29), in De Baets (2011) we find alongside the definition of (external) censorship ("the systematic control over historical facts or opinions and their exchange—often by suppression, imposed by or with the connivance of the government or other powers") additional definitions of (internal) self-censorship and (constitutive) historical propaganda (p. 55). Moreover, De Baets goes beyond the state as the locus of censorship. To be clear, his approach is predominantly concerned with personal rather than structural forces—think neo-colonialism, market-capitalism, or the conventions of the historical field—yet, when we study the Annual Reports of the Network Concerned Historians (NCH) we find a wide-range of non-state actors involved in censoring history production too (Network of Concerned Historians).[3]

Let me start by briefly noting the core issues of the NCH. It operates with a concentric circle model consisting of five domains ordered based on their proximity to the core. Central is censorship of history defined narrowly. Examples are many: censorship of historical research, ranging from publication bans to defamation lawsuits, and from online threats to political murder; censorship of historical sources, including illegitimate limitations to archival access and archival destruction; censorship of historical teaching, like unwarranted curricula and textbook revisions, and book bans; and censorship of popular history, including novels, films, theater plays and social media channels. The second circle is censorship of memory, including the suppression of commemorations, obstruction of access to cemeteries, and destruction of material and immaterial cultural heritage. In the third, fourth and fifth circle are, respectively, violations of freedom of information and expression as they pertain to the past, violations of the right to truth, and censorship of historians' activism, including in politics, journalism and human-rights work (De Baets, 2009, 2019, in press).

Not surprisingly given the breadth of issues, the perpetrators of censorship (the 'other powers' in De Baets' definition) are plenty and diverse, including international corporations and civil society groups. An example of the latter is the Brazilian *Escola sem Partido* (EsP; School without a Party),

and similar groups in the Southern Cone (Jales, in press), previously analyzed in these pages by Bruna Dalmaso-Junqueira and Iana Gomes de Lima (Dalmaso-Junqueira & De Lima, 2024). Hijacking the language of multi-perspectivity and educational neutrality, EsP has pushed legislation limiting the space for debate in schools in particular over histories of gender, sexuality, racism and the transatlantic slave trade—not dissimilar to efforts in North American and Western European schools to ban 'Critical Race Theory,' an empty signifier often used as a placeholder for a variety of historical subjects including gender and women's history and histories of slavery and colonialism (e.g., Young & Allain, in press; Möschel, in press; Dos Santos, in press; Gomes, in press).

Beyond the diversity of actors, the Annual Reports feature a range of examples that could equally fall within a 'constitutive' approach. These include, among many others, the erection or protection of statues supporting the legitimation of power; the establishment of anniversaries in line with a regime's history politics when it is in power, and the organization of counter-commemorations when it is not; the foreclosure of research projects by diverting or threatening to divert funding or by funding only loyal research institutes; and public speeches by political leaders, often contributing to a climate of fear in which historians are more likely to self-censor (Bevernage & Wouters, 2018; Petö & Higuet, in press).

When we thus read the Annual Reports as the kind of 'thick description' argued for by Darnton, we find that De Baets' research, although it starts from a 'restrictive' definition, lays bare how censorship of history production is practiced by states, civil society groups and corporations; how it functions to erase speech, as much as it incites to its substitution; and how it contributes to the creation of a fertile soil for self-censorship. In other words, censorship appears as much more diverse and diffuse than the dichotomous logic of 'old' and 'new' censorship theory would suggest.

Silencing the Past

Whereas De Baets' analysis is primarily concerned with the personal forces that create the conditions for, shape and produce and re-produce historical facts, opinions and their exchange, Michel-Rolph Trouillot examines the structural forces that constitute the historical field. The central concern of his *Silencing the Past* is to locate the tipping point where the inevitable constraints on the historian's freedom, i.e., the effects of their 'subjectivity' in time and place, turn into the production or perpetuation of silences. He distinguishes four realms, whose boundaries are porous: silencing in the production of sources; in the production of archives; in the production of histories; and in the production of historiographies (Trouillot, 2015, ch. 1).

The easiest way to grasp silencing in the production of sources is from the vantage point of the present. For example, in April 2020 the Beijing police arrested the two founders of the Terminus 2049 project, a crowd-sourced platform seeking to archive materials censored under the extreme Chinese online surveillance known as the Great Firewall. More complicated are the social, cultural, economic and political forces that have historically shaped what Achille Mbembe (2002) calls the 'archivability' and 'unarchivability' of sources, including the institutionalization of history as a 19th century discipline in Europe which set the availability of archives of written sources as a condition of possibility for a society's historicity, and constituted its Other as 'pre-historical'.

Archives are as much a repository of sources as they are a historical source themselves. They are the effect of generations of decisions on what to retain and not to retain, sometimes formalized by procedures embedded in codes of ethics, but never without their particular politics. It should be

obvious that absences in the archive are not inherently the result of censorship; for one because it is impossible to archive everything. Moreover, it is an elementary characteristic of history that significance is attributed retrospectively, and that questions of a particular generation could not have been anticipated by its predecessors.[4] The difficulty, which Trouillot scarcely comments upon, is to locate the point when archival selection procedures cross from a legitimate and necessary intervention into producing or perpetuating silences. The work of Ann Laura Stoler, building on Trouillot, has been essential here. She urges historians to approach the politics of archival production through a double gesture, both historical and ethnographic, to uncover the decisions, anxieties and desires that went into its production (Stoler, 2009). By understanding the politics of archival production, it becomes possible to imagine the past beyond what is present in the archive (Davis, 1983; Hartman, 2008).

Silencing in the production of histories is what Trouillot pays most attention to. He starts from the position that facts ("that what happened") and narrative ("that which is said to have happened") are both distinct and entwined, a situation that can only be understood by analyzing history production's conditions of existence. Trouillot argues that an absence of self-reflexivity on the side of historians raised in historically dominant research traditions risks perpetuating hegemonic questions and analytical vocabularies. As examples, he challenges the continued dominance of several 'European' assumptions in Haitian historiography, including the temporality of the Christian calendar and the embeddedness of possible interpretations of the Haitian revolution within European racial hierarchies—examples of the dictates of temporality, spatiality and causality rooted in Global North genealogies, reinforcing and being reinforced by (historical) silences in the production of sources and archives, that should by now be familiar to historians (Trouillot, 2015, chs. 2 & 3). In their individuality, Trouillot's examples indicate silences in the production of history. When they become established in research traditions, they are an example of silencing in the production of historiography. I want to conclude this paragraph by exploring one example of such silencing by analyzing, in line with this journal's focus, history education historiography.

Since the 1980s, history education historiography—like education historiography more broadly—has experienced a so-called transnational turn. Without wanting to delve into the turn's conceptual polemics, two more or less distinct approaches to history education have been recognized within this tradition (Roldán Vera & Fuchs, 2019). The first contains studies of the history of history education as it developed within international institutions and organizations (Fuchs, 2010). The second studies histories of exchange, interaction and entanglements in history education between and beyond the confines of the nation-state. This latter research is rare, and where it exists often takes a diffusionist point of view (Bagchi et al., 2014).

Both approaches heavily focus on histories of the Global North, as is the case with education historiography in general (Takayama et al., 2016). Moreover, the place from which research is done is heavily dominated by Global North institutions. I elsewhere analyzed a sample of Palgrave Macmillan handbooks in which 62 of the 144 case studies (43 percent) focused exclusively on one or more Western countries—compared to only thirteen (9 percent) on South, East and Southeast Asia and ten (7 percent) on Sub-Sahara Africa—and 74 percent was written by scholars at Global North institutions (Zeeman, in press). Denise Bentrovato and Johan Wassermann (2021) recently found similar percentages of scholarship on African history education and by African scholars in some of the leading education journals.[5] These disparities are an example of the pervasive coloniality of knowledge production, and raise the question, to paraphrase Atieno Odhiambo, whether the time has not come to question the pervasive and uncritical reiteration of a hegemonic

episteme which posits that the study of history education, and its censorship, uniquely belongs to western civilization (Odhiambo, 1996)?

The Global North/Global South dichotomy and the decolonial paradigm are rife with issues of their own, not least the ways in which they flatten heterogeneous spaces filled with internal and intersecting inequalities (Ogude, 2024). That said, Trouillot's quadripartite structure of silencing the past raises complicated questions about when legitimate and necessary selections and omissions, rooted in the peculiarities of history production (narrated, constructed, retroactively redescribed) and the 'subjectivity' of (communities of) historians, tip over into censorship embedded within and often providing justification for broader social, political and economic inequalities. Following Trouillot's steps, I have outlined some examples where I believe censorship in history production takes place, including in the study of (history) education and its histories, the subject of this journal. Having discussed various modalities of censorship of history production in De Baets and Trouillot's work, I now turn in conclusion to some recently formulated 'good practices' to counter censorship.

Good Practices

> *The history of censorship and persecution shows how historians have been treated badly, and helps to imagine what it would be like to treat them well.*
>
> — Antoon De Baets

As censorship plays out differently depending on particularities of time and place, resistance against censorship must be adjusted to and created within specific contexts. Teachers' strategies against censorship in history education are a case in point (e.g., Farooq, in press; Williamson, in press). Nevertheless, in a recent paper De Baets (2023) has outlined four 'good practices' that can function as a broader framework for historians and society to resist censorship and "operate within a framework of respect for human rights" (p. 323). Given this journal's mission to "stimulate public and academic debate" (*About – On_education*, 2025), I conclude by critically examining these recommendations hoping to stir discussion on how we—and the content of this *we* is obviously crucial here—can improve the conditions under which history production takes place, including in and through education.

De Baets' first good practice is for historians to work with honesty and integrity, to recognize that sources are stubborn things that can challenge our preconceptions or personal beliefs, to treat the dead with dignity, and to cooperate with colleagues in- and outside the profession.

The second is for historians, politicians and societies at large to create and to contribute to the creation of safe and open spaces for public debate, to treat diverse opinions respectfully and review them based on their merits. Here the tension between *parrhesia* and *isegoria* rears its head again: are safe and open spaces for public debate about history only those that ensure that people can freely speak their mind, or should these spaces include mechanisms that ensure that diverse perspectives are, or at least can be, heard equally? And what, if any, should be the legislative frameworks for these safe and open spaces? Germany offers an interesting case study, where denial of the Holocaust has been banned under §130 of the Criminal Code banning incitement of hatred (*Volksverhetzung*), but where §130 has recently been used by the police of Nordrhein-Westfalen to call on children, parents and teachers to report anyone referring to the genocide in Gaza as a genocide, as part of a wider crackdown in Europe and North America on speech about Palestine and Israel (Polizei

Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2023, pp. 3, 6, 9; cf., Amnesty International, 2024).

De Baets' third good practice is to defend democracy. Despite its practical flaws and political manipulations, the rights to freedom of expression, information and assembly are uniquely positive conditions for practicing historical research. At the same time, truthful historical research is an important component of well-functioning democracies, as it can shed light on the historical trajectories of democratic societies, the advantages and shortcomings of past experiments with political organization, the abuses of democracy both internally and in neo-imperial projects of 'democracy promotion,' and the histories of (continuing) injustices necessitating reparations, reconciliation, and reform.

The final good practice is professional solidarity. Expressions of solidarity can be a glimmer of hope in the face of repression. At the same time, the rights to freedom of expression and information of others are a precondition for historical research: if archives are destroyed or closed in one place, this also limits access to information in others; and for every historian that is censored, the global community of historians loses a potentially invaluable point of view. But again, De Baets does not address the tension between *parrhesia* and *isegoria*: should professional solidarity only extend to those facing persecution or book bans, or should the community of historians actively challenge the 'sanctioned ignorance' of the historical field, the inequalities in the global production and circulation of historical knowledge, the continued dominance of English as the *lingua franca* of academia, and the logic of citation that favors analytical vocabularies produced in the Global North, to name just a few? When professional solidarity is broadened in this way it has the potential to not only be a 'good practice,' but also to mitigate some of the ways in which historians act as censors of their own profession.

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Recommended Citation

Zeeman, R. (2026). Modalities of censorship in history production. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *9*(23). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2026.23.6

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1. I am greatly indebted to Antoon de Baets and the anonymous reviewer for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. A problem that highlights the gap between the two approaches is that some advocates of a constitutive approach to censorship see the act of naming the world as inherently censorial: to define censorship is to render invisible the forces that

fall outside of its definition (e.g., Holquist, 1994, pp. 22–23).

3. The Network of Concerned Historians is a human rights network founded by De Baets in 1995 to document and campaign for censored or persecuted historians and others concerned with the past. I have been the Network's co-editor since 2020 and the coordinator since October 2025. For a recent outline of NCH operations, see (De Baets, 2023).
4. Nevertheless, Verne Harris (2007) has raised the important question whether archival practices can incorporate a kind of openness to the possible questions of future generations.
5. Obviously, these inequalities are further exacerbated by the dominance of the Global North in the publishing industry, among other things (e.g., Collyer, 2016).