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reflections on ancient and modern censorship in education

Avi Mintz

In the West, educational censorship dates to the earliest educational innovators, the sophists. The Spartans, for example, told the sophist Hippias that they would only approve of his lectures of ancient history. A generation later, Plato outlined in The Republic a censorship regime for his imagined kallipolis to flourish – an argument that one critic described as having "hung like a stench over discussions about censorship for two millennia" (Berkowitz, 2021, pp. 20-21). In this essay, Avi Mintz explores how educational censorship in antiquity differs from school censorship since the Enlightenment. While educational censorship in antiquity focused on the complete removal of targeted teachers, ideas and, materials from society, modern school censorship focused on school curriculum alone. This change was controversial in the Enlightenment. Some believed that, in a society increasingly tolerant of a range of views, schools must be free from curricular control. Others, however, argued that censorship was even more important in a time of pluralism; how else could social cohesion and patriotism be cultivated among diverse citizens? As Benjamin Rush (1965/1786) famously put it, schools must be used to "convert men into republican machines" (p. 10). Modern approaches to school censorship raise a challenging question: How might we distinguish the inevitable selection involved in curriculum from censorship? Mintz argues that no meaningful distinctions between the two exist; they are distinctions without a difference. However, these debates about censorship or curriculum selection – whatever we choose to call them – remain important: they present opportunities for articulating a vision for what our society and our citizens might become.

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In fifth century BCE Athens, as in several other cities, elementary schooling was a fact of life. From the age of seven or so, a boy of means would be led by his household slave, a *paidagogos*, to the schoolroom. He would learn to pluck the strings of the lyre, sing and dance. He would memorize what was by then the classic poetry of Homer and others. He would read, write and learn elementary math. Under the severe gaze of his gymnastics trainer, he would practice wrestling his classmates and launching a javelin as far as his adolescent arm could propel it.

Around the age of fourteen, this elementary schooling would end. The boy would have the luxury of a few, unstructured years of freedom until his military service began and he took on the responsibilities of a citizen. He would exercise in the gym and enjoy poetry, but formal schooling was a thing of the past.

This gap between school and military service was, to put it into contemporary business parlance, an untapped market. Some of the intellectuals of the day—men who spent their time discussing

politics, studying oratorical technique, and investigating human conduct and affairs—began to travel around Greece offering lessons to young men, lessons which marked the dawn of higher education. Greek young men so eagerly embraced studying how to argue effectively and gain political power that several of these teachers—sophists, as they came to be called—amassed great fortunes.

The sophists' lessons generated intense controversy. Since they promoted questioning and debate, it was perhaps unsurprising that their lessons were deemed a threat to the established order and consequently censored. Sparta barred the sophist Hippias from offering his typical lectures and lessons there. The Spartans did, however, permit Hippias to deliver approved lectures on ancient history (Plato *Hippias Major*, 283b–284b; Philostratus, 11.495). Protagoras was expelled from Athens for his teachings about the gods (Philostratus, 10.494). Socrates—considered a sophist in Classical Greece notwithstanding Plato's efforts to cast him as a philosopher—fared even worse than Protagoras or Hippias. In 399 BCE, he was found guilty of corrupting the youth and of impiety and was executed in Athens.

That the sophists and their teachings were censored reveals that it is no exaggeration to say that censorship in education dates to some of the earliest educational innovators in recorded Western history. But the history of censorship does not only begin with the actions taken against those controversial teachers. The intellectuals of that period also embarked on analyzing the value of censorship; censorship was both practiced and, perhaps much more influentially, theorized. One philosopher's work casts the longest shadow on the philosophy of censorship: Plato's *Republic*. As one scholar wrote, "the constellation of restrictions Plato imposed on the hapless inhabitants of his imagined republic… have hung like a stench over discussions about censorship for two millennia" (Berkowitz, 2021, pp. 20–21). Plato's *Republic* is thus an ideal place to begin an inquiry into the history of school censorship, and I turn to that next. Afterwards, I discuss school censorship during the Enlightenment, at the dawn of the common school movement. I conclude with a discussion on the nature of school censorship today that draws on these historical insights.

The Case for Censorship in Plato's Republic

In *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates imagines a *kallipolis*—literally a beautiful or noble city. *The Republic* returns to questions of education throughout, and the discussion of the *kallipolis* notably opens with an analysis of its citizens' upbringing and education (376c). Socrates argues that the most important education for future citizens isn't their elementary education in school. Forming citizens begins even earlier with the tales that nurses and mothers tell their children. But if the stories that even the youngest of children hear are so crucially formative, Socrates reasons, "we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We'll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren't" (377b-c).

Thus far in his argument, Socrates articulates insights that are fundamental to any educational enterprise. Education occurs at all times and in all places, not merely when students are receiving formal instruction in schools. If one takes rearing children seriously, one must consider everything they encounter, and thus caregivers' and teachers' selections are of the utmost importance.

Socrates' next step strikes the modern reader as more controversial: "We'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected" (377c). This authoritarianism may give pause, but it is not completely foreign to modern parenting or teaching. There exists a multi-billion-dollar industry where experts instruct caregivers about how they should speak to, play with,

discipline, and feed their children.[1] Teachers too are the targets of, and sometimes enthusiastically welcome, a class of experts who advise which activities, curriculum materials, and pedagogy deliver the best education.[2]

Not a page after Socrates says that the nurses and mothers must be persuaded to tell approved tales, Socrates goes from arguably defensible insights about the importance of selection and the value of educational experts to a much more jarring claim. He lists criteria for the stories that are beneficial for the young, and then he says that the poets must be "compelled" to compose such stories (378c). This too is common today. As Diane Ravitch (2004) uncovered, textbook writers, illustrators and test publishers are subject to exhaustive lists specifying precisely anything which might cause offense (and which often result in historically inaccurate or mind-numbingly dull texts). Socrates, however, did not offer an opportunity for the poets of the *kallipolis* to compose special stories for the youth conforming to guidelines as the textbook and children's literature authors and illustrators are offered today. Today, writers must only deal with censorship of their work if they want to publish with educational publishers. In contrast, Socrates envisions no special youth versions of stories; rather, *all* poetry in the *kallipolis* must be approved by censors. No poet was safe, no matter how revered. Even Homer and Hesiod's poetry—the very foundation of Greek religion and culture—was banned. In *The Republic*'s tenth and final book, Socrates returns to the discussion of poetry (which took place in books two and three), and muses on the severe conditions necessary for Homer and the other exiled poets' return to the *kallipolis* (607c). It is not without reason that Eric Berkowitz (2021) compares Plato to Mao Zedong and Karl Popper (1952) casts Plato as a totalitarian in the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies.*

Why does Socrates jump from (a) the plausible argument that caregivers, and even the government, ought to consider carefully the powerfully formative stories presented to the young to (b) censoring *all* poetry in the *kallipolis* (and exiling the poets to boot)? Why does he completely ignore the possibility of creating stories for children that are different from those available to adults?

The answer to this question reveals a fundamental shift in how we think about censorship in education in the West. Werner Jaeger (1944) concluded that Plato "converted the entire state into an educational institution" (p. 216) but it was actually common for Greeks to believe that all cities educate through their culture and laws. The poet Simonides, born in the sixth century BCE, wrote that "the city teaches a man" (elegy 15). The fifth century Spartans believed that their superiority was due to their unique education (the word *paideia* means both education and culture); they guarded closely their educational traditions, including their military training academy for boys and the poetry of Tyrtaeus, whom the Spartans celebrated above Homer (Mintz, 2018).

Plato thus only subjected to philosophical examination some assumptions that were already prevalent in Greece. Socrates says in Plato's *Menexenus* that a city "molds its people; a goodly one molds good men, the opposed bad" (238c). In several dialogues—Plato's *Crito* (51c), *Apology* (24d), and *Laws* (632a), for example—the city's laws are presented as the educational instrument of the state. [3] In *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates did not call for censorship in education, at least not in the sense that we'd understand it today. As we saw, rather than barring certain stories from schools or prohibiting caregivers from telling them, the problematic material—and its creators—were banned completely from society. Plato called for censorship of poetry, not censorship of poetry in schools or for the young. Socrates provided an educational rationale for censorship, but he was not calling for censorship solely in schools. Hence, we might distinguish *educational censorship* of the sort we see in antiquity from modern *school censorship* which targets merely school curricula and library

holdings.

The historical examples I mentioned above feature only educational censorship. Hippias could only deliver approved lectures in Sparta; he was not permitted to deliver his other lectures to adults separately. Protagoras was exiled and Socrates was executed—neither could be spared his commute by simply refraining from teaching adolescents, although the Athenians were primarily concerned about their influence on the young.[4] If what a teacher was saying or teaching the youth was deemed undesirable, the Greeks reasoned, why allow it in the city at all?

School Censorship in the Modern State

If one believes that certain ideas are harmful to citizens and the state, the most sensible way of keeping them away from the young seems to be the model that Plato, the Soviets and other authoritarian regimes have embraced. Despite the logic of broad, society-wide *educational censorship*, *school censorship* became the norm in the West. There are many reasons for this change, but the foremost is this: absolutist monarchies were increasingly replaced with constitutional monarchies and democracies.

If authoritarian regimes had been primarily concerned with cultivating obedience to the state and social cohesion, the modern republic wished to equip citizens with the ability to evaluate arguments and claims so they could govern themselves by becoming or electing worthy representatives. Debate and dissent would safeguard liberty from tyrannical government interference. John Locke (1996/1699), therefore, argued that education was a preparation for liberty and the program of education he proposed was focused primarily on developing the child's reason. In his "Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge," Thomas Jefferson wrote that education preserves citizens' freedom as they would be "rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens" (1779). Mary Wollstonecraft (1995/1792) understood education to be foundational to liberating women and promoting their independence, in addition to being necessary for all citizens.

But what should education for freedom and autonomy look like in a modern state? Should it merely focus on cultivating independent judgement? Or should it focus additionally, or instead, on forming patriotic citizens? Jean-Jacques Rousseau opened *Emile* by asking that very question: should one educate a man or a citizen (1979/1762, p. 39)? Rousseau was so wary of impairing independent judgement that his fictional student lives in relative isolation and would not encounter books or learn to read until he was a teenager. However, just a few years later, Rousseau proposed a new constitution for Poland, and social cohesion and patriotism were the central aims of the system of schooling he proposed. He argued that common schools "must give souls the national form, and so direct their tastes and opinions that they will be patriotic by inclination, passion, necessity," and thus proposed a curriculum that made schools an instrument for manufacturing patriots (1997/1772, p. 189). Rousseau would censor anything in the curriculum that failed to celebrate Poland and its history.

Should the modern state educate a man or a citizen? Rousseau, arguably the Enlightenment's finest educational philosopher, was deeply ambivalent.[5] Examples abound of Enlightenment philosophers on either side of this question about the purpose of common schools. Some argued that citizen formation via a patriotic curriculum was even *more* necessary in a democratic republic. Social cohesion was severely tested among a populace encouraged to debate how society should be

governed. Benjamin Rush (1965/1786), an eighteenth-century American reformer, memorably hoped that "our schools of learning, by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government" (p. 10). Rush famously argued that schools could and should "convert men into *republican machines*" (Rush, 1965/1786, p. 10).

Others were appalled by such calls to use schools to cultivate social cohesion and form citizens. Joseph Priestley (1768) argued that such schooling would threaten the very individuality that makes modern society estimable and, furthermore, that state education would illegitimately bias citizens towards the government. John Stuart Mill (1859) later articulated an impassioned argument against state control of education:

> a general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body. (pp. 201–202)

Benjamin Constant, who lived through the tumultuous years of the French Revolution, chided the proponents of authoritarian state education and argued that it was antithetical to modern liberty. He challenged education's "revival of censorship [*censure*] in modern times":

> what do we not hear of the need to allow the government to take possession of new generations to shape them to its pleasure, and how many erudite quotations are employed to support this theory! The Persians, the Egyptians, Gaul, Greece and Italy are one after another set before us… whose share in social authority consoled them for their private enslavement. [But] we are modern men, who wish each to enjoy our own rights, each to develop our own faculties as we like best, without harming anyone; to watch over the development of these faculties in the children whom nature entrusts to our affection, [is] the more enlightened as it is more vivid. (1819, pp. 322–323)

But could modern schooling avoid the "revival of censorship," as Constant hoped? Priestley, Mill, and Constant associated censorship with *government* control of education. Would censorship cease to be a problem in the absence of government control of education?

To evaluate that argument, we might consider the most influential modern argument that schooling should be required, but not administered, by governments. Following in Mill's footsteps, Milton Friedman (1962) argued that schools should be run like free markets, with parents choosing what seems best and schools competing for their business. Friedman understood that a society required certain shared values and the cultivation of those values justified a governmental requirement for education. But Friedman recognized a problem with even that minimal goal of shared values. He wrote "drawing a line between providing for the common social values required for a stable society, on the one hand, and indoctrination inhibiting freedom of thought and belief on the other is another of those vague boundaries that it is easier to mention than to define" (1962, p. 90).

The reason it is so hard to define is that a definition does not exist. Ancient educational censorship was possible (though undesirable) through oppressive state control. Yet modern educational reforms and philosophers are faced with the same problem as Plato: they need to select some ideas to present to students and identify others that must be kept out of sight. Is all educational selection ultimately tantamount to illegitimate censorship or is there a way to distinguish the two?

The Inevitability of Censorship

Imagine a society where civic aims—the goal of forming character—were completely absent from K-12 common schooling. The school's mission would involve only two things: ensure students had the skills and knowledge necessary to pursue employment and ensure that, outside of school, they could access and comprehend information to pursue their own education about politics, religion, and any other subject that might shape them as citizens or individuals. Students would learn, for example, to read and write in the country's official language or languages. Students would learn math, and they'd have courses in physical education and art. Citizens would expect that schools refrain from forming character and administrators would explicitly prohibit teachers from doing so.

Let us explore this thought experiment's implications. If the school explicitly avoided civic aims that form character, teaching history or social studies would be completely unthinkable; they would require highly controversial choices about whether, for example, to highlight the country's faults or celebrate its accomplishments. But what about basic literacy? What texts would be used to teach children to read? Any choice is fraught. Consider something as simple as teaching through a story about a child visiting a doctor. As Diane Ravitch (2004) showed, there was a concerted effort in the 1970s to write school texts that place women in roles that were historically the province of men. That choice, however, is clearly the expression of a civic aim: it reflects a vision of an egalitarian society. But, admirable as that aim might be, there are fundamentalist families that discourage their daughters from pursuing careers and would see such texts as manipulative. (And wouldn't some citizens be justified in arguing that, to make society more inclusive, students must be exposed to non-binary characters as well while others work to ban such additions to the curriculum?) Any selection requires choosing one of these perspectives over the other and that rejected option would rightfully be called censorship by the aggrieved parties.

So perhaps most stories featuring people would have to be shelved in our imagined society. What's left? Maybe texts about science might be approved as the basis for teaching literacy, as long as they don't valorize science as a more estimable enterprise than other professions. The teachers and administrators would guard against presenting any potential profession or area of interest as superior to another because doing so would implicitly suggest that there are ways of being a citizen that are superior to others. However, even prioritizing biology over chemistry, painting over drawing, or basketball over handball, would run that risk.

A curriculum necessarily reflects a series of choices. The exclusion of some material in favor of others is censorship and thus censorship is inevitable. Even if common schools explicitly prohibited teaching civic aims, they would teach them implicitly. Philip Jackson (1968) coined the term "hidden curriculum" to capture this idea. Our thought experiment reveals that common schools that entirely avoid forming character are a logical impossibility.

But one might object, we need a term to distinguish routine selection of course content from the censorship campaigns to remove books from school classrooms and libraries of the sort that the

editors described in the introduction to this special issue. One way we might make such a distinction is to follow Constant, Priestly, Mill, and Friedman. They were focused on *government* censorship measures and Plato's *Republic* (or Maoist or Soviet propaganda) would be exemplars of such government action. The American Library Association's definition of censorship is similar: "a decision made by a *governing authority or its representative(s)* to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person or group's disapproval of its content or its author/creator" (United for Libraries, 2022, p. 1; my emphasis). Perhaps selections that emerge organically from within the school system should not be considered censorship. Someone must make selections. Since teachers and administrators are the people in closest contact with the interests and needs of children and adolescents, their choices reflect professional judgement and, thus, they must not be considered censorship.

Unfortunately, this distinction fails to differentiate selection from censorship. It makes not a whit of difference if a teacher, principal, school librarian or the school board removes LGBTQIA+ activist George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue* from schools rather than the government or activist parent groups. Regardless of who initiates its removal, a choice has been made to prevent students from accessing that work. The origin of the choice is not relevant.

Perhaps censorship can be distinguished from justified selection by reference to sound educational aims. An activist parent group that seeks to ban a book simply because they don't want their children to be exposed to ideas that many find acceptable would be censorship but a choice that removes books that might discourage students from seeing their fellow citizens with more empathy would be mere selection. Such a distinction would fare no better. In 2023, The Peel Region School Board's—Peel is a municipality in the Greater Toronto Area—guidelines for book culling became public: any book published more than fifteen years ago would be sent to landfill so that the only books that remained could "offer a more precise, inclusive, culturally relevant, and responsive collection of texts for students" (The Canadian Press, 2023). The Peel Board rejected the charge that it was censoring books because their culling process was based on justifiable educational aims. But a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (a reference Peel students would not encounter in school thanks to their school board's efforts to create a culturally relevant library for them). Living in a pluralistic society means we cannot simply call our curricular choices warranted while smearing others' as censorship. Again, intellectual honesty requires admitting progressive efforts to censor material—as the Peel Board did—are censorship. Censorship is inevitable in education – it is not merely the tool one's opponents use to alter the curriculum.

If I am correct that censorship is inevitable in education, does it follow that one need not be concerned about it? Should activists outside schools or within them be tolerated or even encouraged? Of course not. Schools in the modern era became the sites for debate about visions of the ideal citizen and the ideal state. In antiquity, the question would have been debated about regimes generally (though, realistically, few authoritarian regimes would have permitted such a debate). The Enlightenment and the rise of democratic republics brought a new problem: if citizens were encouraged to think critically and dissent, what would save society from civil war or anarchy? That problem was awkwardly foisted upon the school system. If we look at the countries that have now had over a century of experience with widespread common schooling, we might conclude, charitably, that the results are mixed. Common schools have clearly not prevented polarization. Indeed, in a world where adolescents' experiences are dominated by social media and youth culture, it would be reasonable to wonder whether the school shapes character much at all, let alone how much the books in the school library shape identity (as teens are less and less likely to read the

books on offer there). Nevertheless, the debates about what books and materials should be available in schools do matter. The censorship debates may be largely performative and political, but they are an important arena for articulating a vision for what our society and our citizens might become.

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1. Globally, spending on parenting apps reached roughly two billion dollars in 2023 ("Parenting Apps Market," 2024).
2. An estimate of the professional development market for K-12 schools was 5.78 billion in 2019 ("US Professional," 2025).
3. Plato credits Protagoras with articulating the same argument (*Protagoras*, 326d).
4. The only exception to blanket censorship irrespective of the age of the audience from Classical Greece of which I am aware is not straightforward. After the overthrow of Athens' democracy in 404 BCE, the new leaders, known as the Thirty Tyrants, passed a law forbidding teaching the art of arguments or speeches (*logoi* has both connotations). The law made no distinction between teaching the art of *logoi* to the young and adults—it was banned entirely. Socrates was called before the Thirty after criticizing them. They showed him the law and ordered him to stop speaking to the young. Socrates playfully (and daringly) sought clarification on what he would be permitted to say and to whom and was ordered to stop conversing with anyone under thirty (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I.2.31–38). Although this order suggests a recognition in antiquity of the distinction between school and educational censorship, Xenophon suggests that the application of the law to Socrates was simply a punishment for his challenge to their authority, an attempt to deny him the activity he loved most: discussing philosophy. Moreover, whether the law applied at all to Socrates is questionable since, at least in Xenophon and Plato, he denied that he was a teacher (and accepted no fees for teaching).
5. On Rousseau's attempts to reconcile education for autonomy and social cohesion, see Mintz (2023).