Book reviews

The Routledge companion to freedom of expression and censorship
John Steel and Julian Petley (eds)
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'Freedom of expression is one of the foundational human freedoms,' write the editors in their Introduction to this brilliantly engaging, multi-faceted collection. It is a sentiment redolent of the high priest of debates about free speech, John Stuart Mill, who closely connected freedom of speech with the very act of thinking itself. And if, by a slight contortion through the history of ideas, we go back further still to Descartes' *cogito*, then it is not just that I think therefore I am, but I am because I am free to express what I think.

John Steel and Julian Petley, the editors, state that they offer the book as 'a guide for the perplexed in this extremely complex and rapidly changing area' (5). And how right they are about the complexity and the speed of change. Much of that complexity and speed has arisen and continues to be stimulated by digital technology and online *fora* within which ideas can be expressed (and, just as importantly, can be stifled, monitored and abused). The development of technology and its subsequent impact on who can or cannot play gatekeeper – or censor, or critic – is a theme which recurs through a number of chapters.

Freedom of speech is not an absolute right, and the freedom – like many freedoms – is open to abuse. To put it in a Miltonic idiom, free expression is a liberty and not a licence, and with the liberty comes responsibilities, a point arguably in need of ever-greater emphasis in the ultra-networked digital societies of the 21st century. As the editors make clear in their Introduction, there is a need to be vigilant of those with an agenda that consists of not enjoying freedom of expression but rather of being free from the consequences of that expression.

This is a big book, both literally and in terms of its intellectual and geographical scope. The companion begins with a series of analytical chapters on the evolution of philosophical thinking around freedom of expression. And if, as Alfred North Whitehead said of philosophy generally that it consisted of nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato, then the specific philosophical debates around freedom of expression arguably consist of footnotes to Mill's *On liberty*. Mill and John Milton duly inform much of the early chapters' sophisticated debate, with other key thinkers on the issue of open (and closed) inquiry, such as Montesquieu, Kant and Plato, also well covered.

But this is not a collection of philosophical rumination detached from urgent contemporary debates. In particular, Part Three of the book, entitled 'Key controversies', is a stimulating survey of many of the main issues around freedom of expression, with everything from 'woke' and 'cancel culture' to the free speech controversies caused by the French state's policy of *laïcité* (secularism) receiving stimulating attention.

The chapter by Ezequiel Korin and Jairo Lugo-Ocando focusing on Latin America presents a cogent case for freedom of expression meaning little for those whose voice is never heard and, in concert with a number of other chapters, touches on the importance of the *positive liberty* of populations/electorates having the right to information from a free press. Relatedly, the book is very strong on the phenomenon of market censorship, as Steel and Petley state eloquently in its opening pages:

A theme running through much of this collection is that insufficiently regulated commercial forces can lead to a form of what has been aptly called market censorship. This is in complete contradistinction to the still fashionable idea in certain quarters that 'deregulating' media markets will automatically lead to greater freedom of expression in those markets – the so-called 'marketplace of ideas'. Britain's highly concentrated national press market, and its much remarked-upon ideological homogeneity and debased journalistic standards, decisively give the lie to this chimera (9).

It says much about the editors' commitment to truly global representation in the volume that they admit they would have liked more contributions from the Global South and outside the Anglosphere, including Russia, Hungary and Poland, where free speech is significantly imperilled. But they are perhaps being a little too hard on themselves. This companion is a timely and wide-ranging study of one of the key issues of civilisation and deserves to stimulate further debate across the world.

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