Muffled Voices and Frightened Printers or How to Lose the Future


The candles were lit, people gathered in a circle, the vigil had started. My half-finished essay lay abandoned in the library because there was a greater cause to join; it was the time to express solidarity and reaffirm values; paralysed paper soldiers clutching pencils. A painful reminder of modernity’s irony – blogs, chats, and infinite arbitrarily insulting sections of the internet are dragging the innocent into clockworks of spiteful discussion against finely tuned provocations and minutely calculated personalized insults. It is the internet; too vast and dispersed to patrol effectively or advance on hobby-horse haters. So we stop caring and thus offensiveness is inevitably tolerated. But the printed word is different, it has a history, it serves a purpose. It can bring down governments and create nations. The rallying cry of *Common Sense* united the Thirteen Colonies in the fight against British subjugation; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* received credit for the Civil War and consequently the Thirteenth Amendment. Were Thomas Paine’s or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s writings deemed offensive? Certainly. As both of them supported the oppressed, there is no logical alternative. Nowadays, it is difficult – if not impossible – to imagine history without them.

When Benjamin Franklin remarked that “If all Printers were determin’d not to print any thing till they were sure it would offend no body, there would be very little printed” this is more than a statement of fact. He is championing the right to offend, a free press, and in extension freedom of speech. These rights matter greatly. They are of the utmost importance for minorities as they constitute a tool and weapon against the masses who seek to assimilate or destroy them. Restricting free speech and a free press to protect minorities is a non-sequitur per se.

Ben Franklin, himself both printer and writer, did not shy away from articulating his opinions, provoking and educating those around him. Together with the well-known publications under his own name and pseudonyms like Silent Dogood or The Busy-Body, his article on slavery challenged widely-practiced and accepted realities. Writing as Historicus, he wittily criticises the institution by assuming the viewpoint of Algiers Muslims who engaged in the Christian Slave Trade. Nonetheless, even great men like Franklin experience situations in which their own standards are difficult to uphold. It is our duty to acknowledge them. If we instead prefer
to uncritically revere flawless ideals turned into idols towering above us, far removed from criticism, then we do not only trespass on our own values of rationality and truth but we also deny ourselves an opportunity to learn from their insecurities. On reading Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, Franklin advised the former to burn it before anyone else could read it in order to safeguard the author against his enemies and the scandal it would invoke. It remains unclear if this advise was intended to protect a friend or if Franklin himself would have refrained from publishing such a radical book for the sake of tranquillity. However, as we have already established, only opposing views can lead to wider discussion and thereby to progress and understanding. Light only comes from heat. Democracy and pluralism necessitate debate and argument. But there is more at stake than the individual’s right to express their views: Every time somebody’s right to say or print something is denied, I am likewise a victim of that decision because it deprives me of my right to be exposed to these ideas. How can I ever be confident that my views are correct if they are not tested by others, thus forcing me to reflect? We must not forget how books that were decried and scandalized following their publication challenged perspectives taken for granted. These books dared to speak what other people did not dare to think. Has human understanding not progressed thanks to works like the already mentioned *Age of Reason*, or Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, or even Hannah Arendt’s *Banality of Evil*? Too often do we forget these lessons and criticise the writers for their audacity just because they are the easy targets – “how dare they?”

It is more convenient to blame Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses* than it is to defend his rights against a fanatical Islamic Republic. It seems less dangerous to blame Danish Cartoonists and magazine printers than it is to engage in a meaningful discussion – or even reprint the “insult” so that the individual may judge for himself. It is also more untroublesome to withdraw the promised publication of *Goebbels: Mastermind of the Third Reich* by David Irving than it is to have an established narrative challenged and to defend what we claim to know for certain. None of this means that these decisions are in any way desirable; quite the opposite, they are disgraceful. It also proves the ongoing relevance of Franklin’s remark because none of these works would ever have seen the light of day. Driven to its logical conclusion, there would not be a single book in print since the notion of “being offended” is too subjective and cannot be considered as a serious guideline for anything. Too readily people feel offended and are willing to censor the other, while censorship of their own views remains unacceptable. Claims of “being offended” amount to nothing but an attempt to cut short a discussion. In its place we need the opportunity to apply our own reason and – in
the tradition of Christopher Hitchens – I challenge anybody to name one individual to whom they would gladly delegate the task of deciding for them what they can or cannot read. We find ourselves in a precarious situation because freedom of the press does not exist in Britain and there is no first Amendment (or even Constitution) to turn to for protection. If matters were different, situations like the raiding of the Guardian’s offices and the destruction of hard-drives (in the vain hope that this would prevent further Snowden revelations from being published) would be unimaginable.

After the attacks in Paris, British government officials were quick to express solidarity and emphasize the importance of free speech and democracy. But even as we gathered on the lawn to commemorate the journalists, the government was engaged in passing a new Counter-Terrorism bill to tackle “extremism” that ironically threatened free speech and academic freedom more than it did terrorism. As we were lighting our candles on campus, little did we know that universities would soon be declared potential “radicalising locations.” We had no idea that even on our campus a student would soon be detained as a potential terrorist threat – his possession of three Arabic books and academia-oriented online research introduced as evidence. This frightens me. It frightens me because if the reading of texts is turned into an offense then this prevents even the act of thinking and writing that necessarily precedes printing. As the attentive reader might have surmised, I am writing in the first person for a reason. I am writing in the first person because I am an individual with a voice, because there is an urgency and a precedent. I wish it were a bad joke or a dystopian fantasy, but I am currently carrying a slip of paper prepared by a course co-ordinator to confirm that I am required to read “radical” literature for my Political Islam course. This is Britain in 2015 and I refuse to be told that I am limited in my choice of books – or if not legally restricted from reading them, at least at risk of being investigated as a threat to the nation. I claim the right to read, discuss, and write about any topic. I also claim the right to be challenged by the writings and ideas of my fellow creatures. Does that make me a dangerous extremist? Am I a potential threat like the other innocent students who have been investigated all across Britain? Law-abiding citizens are being turned into enemies, not of their own free choice or calculated actions, but because they insist on exercising their rights.

Bullets rip through paper and bodies. They kill writers and printers; there are many ways of silencing by violent force those who are “offensive.” Sometimes the same aim is pursued through legal channels. In situations like these, courageous individuals are more difficult to
come by than people with guns. While it is possible to turn helpless masses into killing machines, setting up an army of influential child writers is more difficult to conjure up even in the imagination. However, no matter how many of us find their death or temporary imprisonment in the search for freedom, their voices – if muffled – will remain persistent. We have to take up the fight because, again invoking Ben Franklin’s wisdom, “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

There simply is too much to lose.

(1498 words)