READERS, CENSORSHIP AND THE PUBLIC MIND

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Part 1 – Readers

CD: As part of this presentation on the history of 18th century literature and ideas, with the Enlightenment's fight as guiding theme, we must focus on the concrete conditions of the dissemination of texts and ideas. Ariane Revel, the most significant factor thereupon is it not the rise in readers' number?

AR: The number of readers increases indeed, but mainly what changes is the way people read. Print consumption increases throughout the 18th century, and possession of books is rising in all strata of society. But there are also many ways to access a book without having to buy it. Alongside persisting old practices, such as reading aloud or lending of books between individuals, new institutions promote the circulation of printed materials. Reading rooms allow, in exchange for a rather expensive fee, access to recent publications. For a lower fee, you can rent a book. Finally, public libraries proliferate. These transformations go hand in hand with a shift from a so-called "intensive" reading to a so-called "extensive" reading. Whereas before one would repeatedly read a few books, especially in lower classes where people would often possess saints' biographies or an almanac to read and re-read, most often out loud, now people start reading more books. This change is significant because reading is becoming more and more related to print production.

CD: Then, what precisely do these readers read?

AR: First, they do not all read the same thing. Depending on the background people come from or the occupation they exercise, they don't have the same readings. However, there are two general trends. On the one hand, religious literature loses its centrality. On the other hand, readings tend to diversify. Thus, in the nobility and in some of the bourgeoisie, the works related to religion recede in favour of the belles-lettres, in particular history but also novels. There are also more books related to science and the arts. For the lower classes, cheap collections like the Blue Library make ancient texts accessible, sometimes shortening or summarising them.

Part 2 – Censorship

CD: To publish under absolute monarchy is to publish in a censorship system. How does censorship work in France and what subjects are receiving particular attention from this censorship?

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AR: In these regimes, censorship is often exercised through several authorities. First, royal censorship is exercised preliminarily. A censor, qualified in the field of the work in question, decides whether or not to grant it a privilege, called permission. Sometimes the book does not get a privilege but is still tolerated. It is then called a "tacit permission".

Censorship may also make the authorization of a work conditional on the deletion or modification of certain passages. After its publication, other institutions can still condemn a book. The Parliament of Paris has this power, but also the Sorbonne and theologians, who carefully examine it to see if it does not infringe on religion. Censorship seeks to identify those who could undermine the monarchy's three great pillars: The King, the Church and morality. But obviously appreciating what constitutes an attack on one of these pillars, or not, is problematic because is not self-evident.

Throughout the century, and especially in the second half of the 18th century, there are heated debates about how censorship should work. For example, how can one identify a dangerous book? Can a work be banned because it is suspected that it could be harmful?

People also wonder about how they can ban books effectively. Indeed, censorship feeds an underground network and books are sometimes all the more sought after if they are illicit. If censored texts circulate anyway, what is the point of prohibiting them? Diderot, in his *Lettre sur le commerce de la librairie*, underlines the paradoxes of censorship. It draws attention to banned books and, additionally, hurts authors' remuneration because they then become vulnerable to the counterfeits proliferating in the underground trade.

Part 3 – Secularisation and the public mind

CD: When historians of ideas speak of the 18th century and the diffusion of Enlightenment, they often point to two elements: the creation of what may be called public opinion and what we call a secularisation process. How can we describe these two movements, and can we consider that they go hand in hand?

These are two major milestones in the political culture evolution of the end of the Ancient Regime and they both have to do with the way we determine what is authoritative. Previously, what was called "public opinion" was mostly related to the reputation and public esteem of an individual. In the middle of the 18th century, the term becomes politicized. Public opinion is an instance that renders judgments and must be considered in the way a country is governed. As of today, explaining exactly what it is and where it comes from is difficult. For example, when the government seeks to keep abreast of public opinion, they want the opinion of their subjects, what is being said, feelings expressed towards the king that are not always rational, etc.

But on the other hand, at the same time, philosophers but also lawyers, for example, start referring to public opinion as if it was an authority, a tribunal of reason, able to soundly judge a legal case or a political action. They recognize the weight of what is said and thought among people who have no direct political power. This emergence can be linked to the secularization process that marks the century, meaning authorities hitherto considered sacred lose their hold. As religious authority declines, public opinion becomes a new point of reference for what is true and just. And what is interesting is that it adds value to the advent of a shared logic, in accordance with Enlightenment ideals.

CD: Ariane Revel, thank you very much for this summary enlightening us on the concrete conditions of the French Enlightenment's development.

AR: Thank you.