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# Inhalt

<b>ARNDT BRENDECKE</b>	
Von Postulaten zu Praktiken. Eine Einführung .....	13
<b>1 Die Praxis der Theorie.</b>	
Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog .....	21
<b>MARIAN FÜSSEL</b>	
1.1 Praxeologische Perspektiven in der Frühneuzeitforschung .....	21
<b>FRANK HILLEBRANDT</b>	
1.2 Vergangene Praktiken. Wege zu ihrer Identifikation .....	34
<b>SVEN REICHARDT</b>	
1.3 Zeithistorisches zur praxeologischen Geschichtswissenschaft .....	46
<b>DAGMAR FREIST</b>	
1.4 Historische Praxeologie als Mikro-Historie .....	62
<b>2 Ärztliche Praktiken (1550–1750)</b>	78
<b>MICHAEL STOLBERG</b>	
2.1 Zur Einführung .....	78
<b>VOLKER HESS</b>	
2.2 Schreiben als Praktik .....	82
<b>SABINE SCHLEGELMILCH</b>	
2.3 Ärztliche Praxistagebücher der Frühen Neuzeit in praxeologischer Perspektive ...	100
<b>MICHAEL STOLBERG</b>	
2.4 Kommunikative Praktiken. Ärztliche Wissensvermittlung am Krankenbett im 16. Jahrhundert .....	111

3 <i>Saperi</i> . Praktiken der Wissensproduktion und Räume der Wissenszirkulation zwischen Italien und dem Deutschen Reich im 17. Jahrhundert .....	122
<b>SABINA BREVAGLIERI, MATTHIAS SCHNETTGER</b>	
3.1 Zur Einführung .....	122
<b>SABINA BREVAGLIERI</b>	
3.2 Die Wege eines Chamäleons und dreier Bienen. Naturgeschichtliche Praktiken und Räume der politischen Kommunikation zwischen Rom und dem Darmstädter Hof zu Beginn des Dreißigjährigen Krieges .....	131
<b>SEBASTIAN BECKER</b>	
3.3 Wissenstransfer durch Spionage. Ein florentinischer Agent und seine Reise durch Nordeuropa .....	151
<b>KLAUS PIETSCHMANN</b>	
3.4 Musikgeschichtsschreibung im italienisch-deutschen Wissenstransfer um 1700. Andrea Bontemps „Historia musica“ (Perugia 1695) und ihre Rezension in den „Acta eruditorum“ (Leipzig 1696) .....	163
4 Praktiken frühneuzeitlicher Amtsträger und die Praxis der Verwaltung .....	174
<b>STEFAN BRAKENSIEK</b>	
4.1 Zur Einführung .....	174
<b>HANNA SONKAJÄRVI</b>	
4.2 Kommissäre der Inquisition an Bord. Schiffssinspektionen in Vizcaya ca. 1560–1680 .....	177
<b>ULRIKE LUDWIG</b>	
4.3 Verwaltung als häusliche Praxis .....	188
<b>HILLARD VON THIESSEN</b>	
4.4 Gestaltungsspielräume und Handlungspraktiken frühneuzeitlicher Diplomaten ...	199
<b>CORINNA VON BREDOW</b>	
4.5 Gestaltungspotentiale in der Verwaltungspraxis der niederösterreichischen Kreisämter 1753–1799 .....	210

<b>BIRGIT EMICH</b>	
4.6 Handlungsspielräume, Netzwerke und das implizite Wissen der Beamten.	
Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken frühneuzeitlicher Amtsträger und die Praxis der Verwaltung“ .....	222
5 Religiöse Praxis im Exil .....	227
<b>JUDITH BECKER, BETTINA BRAUN</b>	
5.1 Zur Einführung .....	227
<b>JUDITH BECKER</b>	
5.2 Praktiken der Gemeindebildung im reformierten Exil des 16. Jahrhunderts .....	232
<b>TIMOTHY FEHLER</b>	
5.3 Armenfürsorge und die Entwicklung der Informations- und Unterstützungsnetzwerke in und zwischen reformierten Exilgemeinden .....	245
<b>BETTINA BRAUN</b>	
5.4 Englische katholische Inseln auf dem Kontinent: Das religiöse Leben englischer Exilnonnen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert .....	256
6 Materielle Praktiken in der Frühen Neuzeit .....	267
<b>DAGMAR FREIST</b>	
6.1 Zur Einführung .....	267
<b>BENJAMIN SCHMIDT</b>	
6.2 Form, Meaning, Furniture: On Exotic Things, Mediated Meanings, and Material Practices in Early Modern Europe .....	275
<b>CONSTANTIN RIESKE</b>	
6.3 All the small things: Glauben, Dinge und Glaubenswechsel im Umfeld der Englischen Kollegs im 17. Jahrhundert .....	292
<b>LUCAS HAASIS</b>	
6.4 Papier, das nötigt und Zeit, die drängt übereilt. Zur Materialität und Zeitlichkeit von Briefpraxis im 18. Jahrhundert und ihrer Handhabe .....	305

<b>ANNIKA RAAPKE</b>	
6.5	Dort, wo man Rechtsanwälte isst.
	Karibische Früchte, Sinneserfahrung und die Materialität des Abwesenden .....
	320
7	Praktiken der römischen Bücherzensur im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert .....
	332
<b>ANDREEA BADEA</b>	
7.1	Zur Einführung .....
	332
<b>MARGHERITA PALUMBO</b>	
7.2	„Deve dire il Segretario che li sono stati accusati...“
	Die vielfältigen Wege der Anzeige an die Indexkongregation .....
	338
<b>ANDREEA BADEA</b>	
7.3	Über Bücher richten? Die Indexkongregation und ihre Praktiken der
	Wissenskontrolle und Wissenssicherung am Rande gelehrter Diskurse .....
	348
<b>BERNWARD SCHMIDT</b>	
7.4	Was ist Häresie?
	Theologische Grundlagen der römischen Zensurpraxis in der Frühen Neuzeit ...
	361
<b>MARCO CAVARZERE</b>	
7.5	The Workings of a Papal Institution. Roman Censorship and Italian Authors in
	the Seventeenth Century .....
	371
8	Can you hear the light?
	Sinnes- und Wahrnehmungspraktiken in der Frühen Neuzeit .....
	386
<b>DANIELA HACKE, ULRIKE KRAMPL, JAN-FRIEDRICH MISSFELDER</b>	
8.1	Zur Einführung .....
	386
<b>CLAUDIA JARZEBOWSKI</b>	
8.2	<i>Tangendo</i> . Überlegungen zur frühneuzeitlichen Sinnes- und
	Emotionengeschichte .....
	391
<b>HERMAN ROODENBURG</b>	
8.3	<i>Pathopoeia</i> von Bouts bis Rembrandt, oder:
	Wie man die Gefühle der Gläubigen durch ihre Sinne beeinflussen kann .....
	405

<b>DANIELA HACKE</b>	
8.4 <i>Contact Zones</i> . Überlegungen zum sinneshistorischen Potential frühnezeitlicher Reiseberichte .....	421
<b>ULRIKE KRAMPL</b>	
8.5 Akzent. Sprechen und seine Wahrnehmung als sensorielle Praktiken des Sozialen. Situationen aus Frankreich im 18. Jahrhundert .....	435
<b>JAN-FRIEDRICH MISSFELDER</b>	
8.6 Der Krach von nebenan. Klangräume und akustische Praktiken in Zürich um 1800 .....	447
<b>PHILIP HAHN</b>	
8.7 Sinnespraktiken: ein neues Werkzeug für die Sinnesgeschichte? Wahrnehmungen eines Arztes, eines Schuhmachers, eines Geistlichen und eines Architekten aus Ulm .....	458
<b>9 Archival Practices.</b>	
Producing Knowledge in early modern repositories of writing .....	468
<b>MARKUS FRIEDRICH</b>	
9.1 Introduction: New perspectives for the history of archives .....	468
<b>ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON</b>	
9.2 Archival practice and the production of political knowledge in the office of Sir Francis Walsingham .....	473
<b>RANDOLPH C. HEAD</b>	
9.3 Structure and practice in the emergence of <i>Registratur</i> : the genealogy and implications of Innsbruck registries, 1523–1565 .....	485
<b>MEGAN WILLIAMS</b>	
9.4 Unfolding Diplomatic Paper and Paper Practices in Early Modern Chancellery Archives .....	496
<b>10 Praktiken des Verhandelns</b>	509
<b>CHRISTIAN WINDLER</b>	
10.1 Zur Einführung .....	509

**RALF-PETER FUCHS**

10.2 Normaljahrsverhandlung als dissimulatorische Interessenvertretung ..... 514

**MATTHIAS KÖHLER**

10.3 Argumentieren und Verhandeln auf dem Kongress von Nimwegen (1676–79) ..... 523

**TILMAN HAUG**

10.4 Zweierlei Verhandlung? Zur Dynamik „externer“ und „interner“ Kommunikationspraktiken in den Beziehungen der französischen Krone zum Alten Reich nach 1648 ..... 536

**CHRISTINA BRAUNER**

10.5 Ehrenmänner und Staatsaffären. Rollenvielfalt in der Verhandlungspraxis europäischer Handelskompanien in Westafrika ..... 548

**NADIR WEBER**

10.6 Praktiken des Verhandelns – Praktiken des Aushandelns. Zur Differenz und Komplementarität zweier politischer Interaktionsmodelle am Beispiel der preußischen Monarchie im 18. Jahrhundert ..... 560

**JEAN-CLAUDE WAQUET**

10.7 Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken des Verhandelns“ ..... 571

**11 Praktiken der Heuchelei?**

Funktionen und Folgen der Inkonsistenz sozialer Praxis ..... 578

**TIM NEU, MATTHIAS POHLIG**

11.1 Zur Einführung ..... 578

**THOMAS WELLER**

11.2 Heuchelei und Häresie. Religiöse Minderheiten und katholische Mehrheitsgesellschaft im frühneuzeitlichen Spanien ..... 585

**NIELS GRÜNE**

11.3 Heuchelei als Argument. Bestechungspraktiken und Simoniedebatten im Umfeld von Bischofswahlen der Frühen Neuzeit ..... 596

**BIRGIT NÄTHER**

11.4 Systemadäquate Artikulation von Eigeninteressen: Zur Funktion von Heuchelei in der frühneuzeitlichen bayerischen Verwaltung ..... 607

<b>TIM NEU</b>	
11.5 „nicht in Meinung das [...] etwas neuwes eingeführt werde“ Heuchelei und Verfassungswandel im frühen 17. Jahrhundert	619
<b>12 Praktiken des Entscheidens</b>	630
<b>BARBARA STOLBERG-RILINGER</b>	
12.1 Zur Einführung	630
<b>BIRGIT EMICH</b>	
12.2 <i>Roma locuta – causa finita?</i> Zur Entscheidungskultur des frühneuzeitlichen Papsttums	635
<b>ANDRÉ KRISCHER</b>	
12.3 Das Gericht als Entscheidungsgenerator. Ein englischer Hochverratsprozess von 1722	646
<b>GABRIELE HAUG-MORITZ</b>	
12.4 Entscheidung zu physischer Gewaltanwendung. Der Beginn der französischen Religionskriege (1562) als Beispiel	658
<b>MATTHIAS POHLIG</b>	
12.5 Informationsgewinnung und Entscheidung. Entscheidungspraktiken und Entscheidungskultur der englischen Regierung um 1700	667
<b>PHILIP HOFFMANN-REHNITZ</b>	
12.6 Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken des Entscheidens“	678
<b>13 Die Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen</b>	684
<b>DANIEL SCHLÄPPI</b>	
13.1 Die Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen. Forschungsperspektiven hinsichtlich von Praktiken menschlichen Wirtschaftens im Umgang mit Ressourcen	684
<b>14 Fachgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit</b>	696
<b>JUSTUS NIPPERDEY</b>	
14.1 Die Institutionalisierung des Faches Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit	696

## 7.5 The Workings of a Papal Institution. Roman Censorship and Italian Authors in the Seventeenth Century

In early modern Europe, Roman censorship embodied to some extent the triumph of bureaucracy and normative control. In comparison with the weak and poorly equipped administrations of other European States, the Papacy organised an imposing apparatus in order to supervise the world of printing in all its aspects, according to the so-called *Index librorum prohibitorum*: lists both of prohibitions and of censorial “laws”. The Catholic Church exerted its control from Rome through the Congregation of the Index and the Inquisition, which had at its disposal a group of censors in every Italian city or, better, in every city of the Northern-Central part of the Italian Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, it has been rightly noticed that in an age generally characterised by variable relations of power, the censorial system adopted by the Church was incredibly “modern” in the Weberian sense of the term, that is, as far as its efficiency and its marked, self-conscious centralism were concerned.<sup>2</sup>

However, this aspect of undeniable innovation encountered several limitations and has to be considered within the general framework of Italian society, the favourite (and perhaps only) playground of Roman censors. In early modern Italy, the norms enforced by papal censorship established a fundamental criterion for decision-making, although they never worked as the undisputed rule of law. At the same time, the repression promoted through Inquisition trials and pyres of books was a model of inflexibility rather than a daily practice.<sup>3</sup> In the long run, the interpretation of norms according to current situations and the negotiations conducted both by censors and by all those who had to deal with them proved more effective for the success of Roman censorship than such demonstrative

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1 On the institutions of the Roman censorship, the concurrence between Congregation of the Index and Holy Office and a meticulous periodization, see Wolf, Hubert/Schmidt, Bernward (eds.): *Benedikt XIV. und die Reform des Buchzensurverfahrens. Zur Geschichte und Rezeption von “Solicita ac provida”*. Paderborn 2011.

2 Reinhard, Wolfgang: Das Konzil von Trient und die Modernisierung der Kirche. Einführung, in: Prodi, Paolo/Reinhard, Wolfgang (eds.): *Das Konzil von Trient und die Moderne*. Berlin 1996, pp. 23–42, especially p. 27.

3 The number of cases of possession or reading of forbidden books prepared for trials by the Inquisition was quite low compared with the overall activity of the tribunal. Moreover, these accusations emerged in most cases from investigations on magical practices. Cf. Visintin, Dario: *L'attività dell'inquisitore Fra Giulio Missini in Friuli (1645–1653): l'efficienza della normalità*. Trieste/Montereale Valcellina 2008, pp. 136–156.

displays of power. This can hardly be surprising, if one investigates Church censorship as an institution which continuously had to take into account, on the one hand, the juridical, political and cultural languages employed in the contexts in which it operated, and, on the other, the agency of the social actors who took part in the censorial process.<sup>4</sup>

In the following pages I shall call attention to this second aspect, which seems essential in a society mainly founded on networks of relationships and ties of personal fidelity. As regards Roman censorship, the agency of social actors can be analysed both within the censorial institutions themselves, studying the work carried out by censors in adapting norms, and outside the institutions, through a careful survey of the strategies pursued by, among others, printers, booksellers, and authors facing censorship. Focusing on agency and social actors allows us to overcome the conceptual dualism between subjects and objects of control, which traditional schemes of interpretation have made common, as well as unveiling the dynamic workings of Roman censorship.

Another preliminary note: this paper will consider censorship as an institution, while ignoring the “ideological” aspect of control. This restriction of the analytical gaze is made possible by the fact that I shall limit my considerations to the fully mature phase of Roman censorship, after the initial confrontation with the Reformation and theological “heresy” had come to an end. During the sixteenth century, one main task of the papal institutions was to firmly define what could be said and what needed to be silenced.<sup>5</sup> In the following period, from the beginning of the seventeenth century until the disruptive changes of the eighteenth century, Italy emerged as the bulwark of papal orthodoxy. Although the representation of post-tridentine Italy as the cradle of Roman Catholicism, untouched and uncorrupted by heresy, waned a long time ago, it is true that forms of explicit and organised religious dissent were no longer the primary concern of Catholic hierarchies.<sup>6</sup> The rules had been fixed, but where, when and by whom they had to be respected was still a matter of negotiation.

<sup>4</sup> About the presuppositions of this “new history of institutions”, see the special issue of *Quaderni storici* 139/1 (2012). On the role played by agency in historical analyses, see the special issue of *History and Theory* 40/4 (2001), dedicated to “Agency after Postmodernism”.

<sup>5</sup> On this first period, see Fragnito, Giglioli: *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna*. Bologna 2005, and Frajese, Vittorio: *La nascita dell'Indice. La censura ecclesiastica dal Rinascimento alla Controriforma*. Brescia 2006.

<sup>6</sup> The wide presence of dissenting movements and opinions in early modern Italy did not give birth to resistance and factually sustained a system of peaceful coexistence with censorship, as Federico Barbiero has keenly pointed out in his *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop. Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice*. Farnham 2012.

### 7.5.1 Communication and Roman Censorship

Censorship is always a complex process, which requires the passive and active participation of many individuals and permeates all conduits of the “communications circuit”. In the case of Roman censorship, and more broadly, of all the censorial apparatuses which were enforced during the so-called *Ancien Régime typographique*,<sup>7</sup> such a circuit represented the path which every printed product had to take before reaching its readers.

As Robert Darnton first showed, and as many other scholars have subsequently confirmed, in this process the different phases of book production (from printing through distribution to binding) played a consistent role; only censorship was left out of the analysis and rather considered as an opponent, outside of the circuit.<sup>8</sup> The reason why censorship was relegated to such a minor role in this representation of the communicative system seems quite evident: how was it possible to include a structure explicitly devoted to silencing communication within a circuit which was, on the contrary, aimed at showing how it had taken shape? However, what modern readers might regard as an inherent contradiction was a factual reality in early modern Rome. Here, censorship was not something external and improvised, but rather a phenomenon which was both justified and normatively foreseen at each step of Darnton’s diagram.

As has been previously stressed, Roman censorship was somewhat exceptional in the European context. In fact, it was the only institution which simultaneously and almost unilaterally took control of both pre-publication censorship and of the repressive censorship that took place after printing.<sup>9</sup> In charge of looking after the entire printing process, this form of censorship involved every stage of the “communications circuit”. Different forms of self-censorship and pre-censorship were the first filter, directly influencing authors and their publishers. Secondly, occasional visits to printers’ shops and surveillance over their guilds, whose spiritual fathers were in some cases friars also acting as inquisitors, proved effective in preventing the appearance of undesired works. Transportation and sale were also under the scrutiny of Roman censors: inquisitors checked bales and packages in the customs office, and inspected bookshops. Finally, readers

<sup>7</sup> Chartier, Roger: L’Ancien Régime typographique. Réflexions sur quelques travaux récents, in: *Annales E.S.C.* 36 (1981), pp. 191–199.

<sup>8</sup> Darnton first proposed his scheme in 1982; since then it has been widely criticised and debated. For a recent overview, see Darnton, Robert: “What is the History of Books” Revisited, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), pp. 495–508.

<sup>9</sup> It is useful to remember that in Spain pre-censorship fell to the state and the repressive censorship to the Church; in France a co-directed regime of censorship between the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris and the government was instituted; in England different lay institutions cooperated on this task, from the Star Chamber to the Master of Revels responsible for stage censorship.

were “protected” from “bad books” through the system of confession – reading a forbidden book was a sin – and even by means of screening private libraries after the death of their proprietors.<sup>10</sup> In other words, “norm” (inspections, revisions, etc.) and “consensus” (self-censorship, catechism, confession) went hand in hand, helping to shape the communicative framework of Italian society and to create a common language of reference for the world of the book. Most significantly, each of these actors knew perfectly well the rules and knowingly accepted the arm of censorship, even if they disagreed with its necessity.

Keeping censorship out of the “communications circuit”, historians of the book have generally not recognized censors as regular actors in the process. These figures must not be confused with police officers or functionaries of the Inner Ministry charged with censorial control, as was the case from the Napoleonic age onwards.<sup>11</sup> Rather, early modern censors were acknowledged members of the *République des lettres*, and in particular, most of those working for the Catholic Church in Rome were both clergymen and scientists, poets, historians or other leading figures of the academic world. Moreover, they did not receive a salary for their work as censors, but their activity was rewarded according to the rules of patronage and clientelism, and to the well-calibrated exchange of favours and benefits which regulated Roman micropolitics.<sup>12</sup> As has been already shown for other European regimes of censorship – quite significantly regimes ruled by state officers,<sup>13</sup> even in Rome censors were not mere enforcers of rules, as they had to keep together a multitude of different and coexistent identities and loyalties. A censor needed to demonstrate loyalty to his own sovereign if he was not a subject of the “papal prince” but, as often happened, had moved to Rome from different parts of Italy; loyalty to his own hometown and family; obviously, loyalty to the Church, which offered him prebends and benefices of various sorts; finally, loyalty to his status as a man of letters, usually engaged in inter-confessional relationships all over Europe.

<sup>10</sup> In general, see Cavazere, Marco: *La prassi della censura nell'Italia del Seicento. Tra repressione e mediazione*. Rome 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Landi, Sandro: *Stampa, censura e opinione pubblica in età moderna*. Bologna 2011, pp. 87–92.

<sup>12</sup> On the concepts of patronage and micropolitics, see the recent overview, which widely emphasises its importance in the Italian context, by Emich, Birgit/Reinhardt, Nicole/von Thiessen, Hillard/Wieland, Christian: Stand und Perspektiven der Patronageforschung. Zugleich eine Antwort auf Heiko Droste, in: *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 32 (2005), pp. 233–265.

<sup>13</sup> On the role played by Spanish censors in the pre-publication phases of control, see for instance Márquez, António: *Literatura e Inquisición en España (1478–1834)*. Madrid 1980, pp. 121–139; on French censorship, see among other works the book focused on the eighteenth century by Birn, Raymond: *La censure royale des livres dans la France des Lumières*. Paris 2007.

Furthermore, the work of Roman censors did not consist in a rigid application of norms or in the automatic enforcement of orthodoxy through repressive measures. The very few “ego-documents” still preserved, in which Roman censors described their efforts from their own point of view, tell us a very different, and sometimes colourful, story. In fact, the image which emerges from these accounts unexpectedly portrays censors’ apartments and convent cells as being crowded with authors, who were not at all afraid of bribing the censor, and with cardinals or other high members of the Roman Curia, who put brutal pressure on the censors themselves in order to defend their protégés.<sup>14</sup> Briefly put, scenes from a bazaar rather than an impeccable bureaucracy.

It is thus necessary to look behind this apparent chaos, “à sa façon un grand fait historique” as Marc Bloch has taught us,<sup>15</sup> in order to uncover the rationale of the juridical and cultural order, which made Roman censorship so powerful. It will not be possible to describe in detail every aspect of the institutional work carried out by censors in early modern Rome. I shall consequently focus on a small fragment of the “communications circuit”, namely on the relationships between authors and their own censors.

### 7.5.2 Testing Roman Censorship in Italian Society

After the censorial norms of the Roman Index were established at the end of the sixteenth century, it became immediately clear that, as they stood, they could not be put into effect: they were simply too strict and rigorous. As a result, in the first decades of the following century, Roman censors were committed to developing different strategies suited to specific situations. For instance, when political or theological motives suggested not licensing a book officially, Roman censors approved the publication of counterfeit editions: that is, books which, although tacitly allowed to be printed in Rome, held the name of an invented printer and the name of a different city on the title page.<sup>16</sup> By the same token, the

<sup>14</sup> See the journal of the Master of the Sacred Palace Raimondo Capizucchi, one of the most important magistrates in charge of both *censura praevia* and *repressiva* in Rome: Cavarzere, Marco: Il diario di un Maestro del Sacro Palazzo (1678–1681). Raimondo Capizucchi e la censura romana, in: *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 24 (2012), pp. 215–295.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Bloch: *La société féodale*. Paris 1994, p. 496.

<sup>16</sup> The problem first appeared with Jewish books: how to allow the printing of books as anti-Christian as those of the Jews? As the Holy Office wrote to the inquisitor of Turin in 1591, if these books were corrected by Roman censors, “they could be considered as approved by the Holy Office” (letter quoted in Parente, Fausto: The Index, the Holy Office, the Condemnation of the Talmud and Publication of Clement VIII’s Index, in: Fragnito, Gigliola (ed.): *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge 2001, pp. 163–193, especially p. 181).

Congregation of the Index and the Holy Office regularly granted reading licenses for books otherwise forbidden. Thanks to these officially permitted breaches of norms, the circulation of a specialised knowledge among a restricted circle of readers (antiquarians, professors of law or medicine) was maintained between Protestant and Catholic countries.<sup>17</sup>

If we take the relationships between authors and censors into account, it is similarly evident that not all authors were equal, or, conversely, that the law could not be said to be equal for everyone. Not all the books condemned were thus put on the Index, nor did they undergo the normal procedures of censorship. In practice, social criteria could not be ignored, and consequently in most cases authors were treated according to their political, religious, and social status. This did not imply a deviation from the official purposes inspiring the work of Roman censorship. On the contrary, the main task of censors was to translate the reasoning of the institution into a language comprehensible and accepted by both authors and their patrons. The history of Roman censorship is characterised not only by resounding prohibitions, but also by more subtle measures. Censors could silently take suspected books off the market or encourage the publication of self-emended versions, however innocently advertised as second editions “enlarged and revised by the author himself”. These different options, which *de facto* circumvented the norms, became common practice during the seventeenth century. A significant example may better clarify the point than further generalisation.

In 1621, Alessandro Tassoni, a nobleman from the city of Modena in Northern Italy, published under a pseudonym a widely successful mock-epic poem entitled “*La Secchia rapita*” (The Stolen Bucket), in which he described the struggle between the inhabitants of Modena and those of the neighbouring city of Bologna over the possession of a bucket.<sup>18</sup> The work was printed outside the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition, in Paris. In so doing, the author sought to evade the surveillance of Church censorship, which could not appreciate the anticlerical mockeries and satirical portraits contained in the volume. Tassoni was thus guilty of breaking the second rule *de correctione librorum* of the Index, which forbade all sentences offensive to “*fama proximorum et praesertim Ecclesiastorum et principum*”, as well as the regulation against anonymous or otherwise

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Frajese, Vittorio: *Le licenze di lettura tra vescovi e inquisitori. Aspetti della politica dell'Indice dopo il 1596*, in: *Società e storia* 22 (1999), pp. 767–818, and Baldini, Ugo: *Il pubblico della scienza nei permessi di lettura di libri proibiti delle Congregazioni del Sant'Ufficio e dell'Indice (secolo XVI): verso una tipologia professionale e disciplinare*, in: Stango, Cristina (ed.): *Censura ecclesiastica e cultura politica in Italia tra Cinquecento e Seicento*. Florence 2001, pp. 171–201.

<sup>18</sup> This episode has been analysed in detail in Cavazere, *La prassi della censura*, pp. 212–217, which offers a broader treatment of these social practices.

disguised works. Even though it had been published abroad, Roman censorship promptly intervened to examine the work, and finally condemned it. Instead of promulgating a decree of prohibition *donec corrigatur*, as the norm demanded, the Congregation of the Index sent a private communication to all the Italian inquisitors, informing them that “the reverence due to the author, otherwise well known for his good reputation and for his less than ordinary social status,” suggested against officially forbidding his work.<sup>19</sup> The inquisitors were therefore requested to collect tacitly all circulating copies of the book. In exchange for this special treatment, Tassoni promised to duly correct his work, following the censors’ criticism: in 1624, a new version of “*La Secchia rapita*” was in fact printed by Tassoni in Rome with the approval of the Congregation of the Index.

Although just one of many accounts which could be drawn from the sources, in many respects Tassoni’s case sheds light on long-term peculiarities of Roman censorship. First of all, the mild attitude of the Congregation of the Index toward “*La Secchia rapita*” reflects the evident state of affairs. In the years when the book was revised, Tassoni lived in Rome and, in 1626, entered the service of the cardinal Ludovisi. From the censors’ point of view, he was, so to speak, “one of them”. He attended the papal Curia, took part in the academic gatherings of the city, and was a faithful son of the Holy Roman Church. The Congregation of the Index had no other choice than to acknowledge that the degree of prohibition of a work needed to be related to its author – in this case a nobleman who benefited from a wide range of protection, someone who could send his “libellous” writing to Paris while living safely in Rome. Tassoni’s story reveals how censorial strategies mirrored the contemporaneous practices employed by the judicial systems of early modern European states.<sup>20</sup> The informal agreement between Tassoni and his censors recalls in many ways the extrajudicial agreements that, in most cases, interested parties arranged before a sentence was issued. Just as early modern lay tribunals inclined to these forms of private settlement rather than to the public prosecution of lawsuits, the Congregation of the Index and, more generally, the

19 The official decree of the Congregation, which Tassoni perfectly knew and even transcribed word by word in a letter to a friend of 30 August 1622, reported: “Die 6 Augusti 1622. In sacra Indicis generali Congregatione [...], facta relatione super libello inscripto *La Secchia, poema eroicomico d'Androvinci Melisone*, ill. DD. ob reverentiam eius authoris alias notae famae et non vulgaris conditionis minime iudicarunt publica et impressa aliqua prohibitione esse prefatum librum impediendum; sed quod, cum ipse author promptum se exhibeat ad omnem eius correctionem et ad colligenda etiam, ne sic currat, omnia eius exemplaria quae poterit, supprimatur ac suspendatur tantum modo quousque aliter iuxta Congregationis beneplacitum fuerit correctus” (cf. Tassoni, Alessandro: *Lettere*. Edited by Pietro Puliatte. Rome/Bari 1978, vol. II, pp. 124–125; for an exemplar of the letter sent to a local Inquisitor, see Modena, Archivio di Stato, Inquisizione, b. 253/I).

20 For an excellent overview of the phenomenon see Schwerhoff, Gerd: *Historische Kriminalitätsforschung*. Frankfurt a. M. 2011, especially pp. 72–112.

post-tridentine Church preferred a “sweet repression”. The main goal of both kinds of court was not the imposition by force of some abstract concept of justice or of a codified body of norms but the re-establishment of a legitimate order.

In sum, in the daily routine of censorship the ability to move beyond rigid normative patterns and to enhance new strategies of conduct was fundamental. This accommodation of the norms constituted a deep change in comparison with the first years of Roman censorship, which was due firstly to a significant shift in the goals of the Indices and of the book prohibitions published in Rome. It was no longer a question of defending Italy against the Protestant doctrines and other forms of heterodoxy. In the seventeenth century, the primary need of the Catholic Church was to exert effective control over a “pacified” world, that of the Italian peninsula.

Secondly, there was another, even more salient reason for this transformation, which induced Roman censorship to privilege such a case-by-case policy. Experience had taught the censors that the repressive weapons at their disposal were too weak to achieve consistent dominion over the world of the book. The ability to individually negotiate with authors was also conducive to tighter control. If Tassoni had not consented to the expurgation of his work, the Congregation would not have had the means to impose its corrections, as happened in Spain through the *Index expurgatorius*.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the first edition would probably have continued to be read and sold, even if in a clandestine manner. At the same time, the ability to impose negotiations outside the censorial institutions allowed the Church to take the authors themselves by the hand and to make its power more heavily perceived through this form of catechetical instruction.

### 7.5.3 Authors and Roman Censors

Briefly returning to the example of “La Secchia rapita”, its vicissitudes can also be examined from the perspective of the author, and not only from that of the Congregation of the Index. Before the work was printed in Paris, Tassoni made numerous attempts to publish it in Venice, engaging in arduous (and unsuccessful) negotiations with the ecclesiastical authorities. After he had reached an agreement with the Congregation of the Index, he managed to minimise the damages to his work, and to limit the corrections “to only four or five words”.<sup>22</sup> To sum up, if the institution was compelled to come to terms with society and

<sup>21</sup> About the Spanish *index expurgatorius* of 1583, see Pinto Crespo, Virgilio: *Inquisición y control ideológico en la España del siglo XVI*. Madrid 1983, especially pp. 67–85.

<sup>22</sup> In a letter of 15 June 1624 Tassoni reported that the Congregation of the Index had decided that the correction of the book was left to Tassoni’s “discretion” (Tassoni, Lettere, p. 158); some weeks later, on 3 July, he wrote to the same correspondent that he had changed “quattro o cinque parole sole sole” (id., pp. 160–161).

its forces, it was the authors themselves whose duty, and in whose interest it was to catalyse those forces. If we leave aside radical examples of resistance, basically two choices were available to Catholic authors: on the one hand, self-censorship in the strictest sense of the term, that is re-writing or even complete removal of any “dissenting” thinking on the other to maintain their own positions by giving a falsely orthodox and pious appearance to what was officially interdicted.

Self-censorship in itself, as a process preceding writing and with an almost psycho-analytic after-taste, can hardly be attested to with documents. We have to be satisfied with the very few and episodic testimonies accessible to us, in which authors confess a willingness to adjust their work before the intrusions of censors. Remaining in the literary field, let us recall a letter written in 1614 by Gabriello Chiabrera, another nobleman devoted to poetry. In this missive, Chiabrera explains that he had decided to review one of his works, the “Amadeide”, erasing some words such as “fate”, “fortune”, and “destiny”, which might “annoy the father Inquisitor” because of their fatalism, apparently contrary to the free will of man.<sup>23</sup> Chiabrera shows himself fully aware of the changes enacted in the previous twenty years: the publication of the Roman Index in 1596 and the imposition of a “modern custom” of censorship, as Chiabrera himself called it.

This was the most drastic option: a pre-emptive sign of defeat. Other authors could react to the censorship issue by inserting, at the beginning of their works, the so-called *Proteste* (Protestations): declarations aimed at “protesting” their innocence and loyalty to the Catholic Church. In practice, they justified their departure from the regulations, explaining the orthodox way in which readers had to interpret their works. According to these elucidations, the narratives of miracles unconfirmed by the Church were mere expressions of human consideration: in fact, it was far from the authors’ intention to assert their authenticity (the judgement of which pertained exclusively to the Holy See), or to disobey the decrees of Pope Urban VIII regarding the canonisation of “Counter-Reformation saints”.<sup>24</sup> In the same way, these *Proteste* excused the employment of religious language for earthly love, often described as capable of raising lovers to levels

23 Letter to Bernardo Castello, Savona 17 aprile 1614: “Dacché io partì da V.S. i pochi giorni i quali sono corsi di qua dalle devozioni di Pasqua io sono stato adosso l’Amadeida, e, pensando pure assai tosto di stamparla, ho ricercato in lei tutto quello che secondo l’uso moderno possa annoiare il P. Inquisitore e secondo me non vi ho lasciata parola che sia sbandita, dico *fato, fortuna, e destini* e simigliante [...].” Cf. Chiabrera, Gabriello: *Lettere (1585–1638)*. Edited by Simona Morando. Florence 2003, p. 205.

24 On Urban VIII’s legislation see Gotor, Miguel: *I beati del papa. Santità, Inquisizione e obbedienza in età moderna*. Florence 2002. In general, the overview by Burke, Peter: How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint, in: Id.: *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy. Essays on Perception and Communication*. Cambridge 1987, pp. 48–62.

of heavenly beatitude.<sup>25</sup> If we took these paratextual materials at face value, we should conclude that, in seventeenth-century Italy, hagiographies did not intend to celebrate the sanctity of the holy men and women whose lives were narrated; astrological predictions were not aimed at predicting; and love poems despised the ardent passions between men and women. In other words, these sorts of *excusatio non petita* served both as an homage to the repressive strength of Roman censorship and as another strategy to circumvent it.

The *Proteste* still constitute a passive agency, insofar as their authors actually avoided confrontation. Moreover, the *Proteste* were often envisioned and suggested by Roman censors themselves, and were not the result of authors' resistance.<sup>26</sup> Authors seemed to have little room for manoeuvre. However, it is necessary to underline once again that everything rested on the situational balance of powers and on networks of relationships. One last example can show a diametrically opposite approach to self-censorship: the menacing attitude of a Venetian patrician toward censors.

In 1653, an anthology of letters of Giovan Francesco Loredan was published in Venice, and afterwards reissued in many different editions throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century. Such a printing endeavour clearly represented the power and importance of one of the leading figures in Venetian contemporary culture. Loredan in fact controlled almost half of the printing production of the city and patronized the famous *Accademia degli Incogniti*, a renowned salon of libertine and erudite men.<sup>27</sup> Among the hundreds of letters published, Loredan included one addressed to an anonymous Franciscan friar from the convent of

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25 In order to show the standardisation of these *Proteste*, here I would like to give two examples, one dating back to the beginning and the other one from the end of the seventeenth century. In the opening pages of the baroque novel *La Stratonica* (1635) a reader could find this explanation: "Le parole Deità, Destino, Fato, Beatitudine e simili sono vaghezze dello scrivere, non sensi del credere. Altro richiedono i dettami della santa Fede, altro gli scherzi d'un profano stile. Io son christiano. Tanto ti basti" (Assarino, Luca: *La Stratonica*. Edited by Roberta Colombi. Lecce 2003, p. 11). In a similar, although much more flattering, mood, Giovanni Battista Grappelli introduced his poems, published in 1697, with these words: "L'autore delle presenti composizioni è nato per la Dio grazia nel grembo della S. Chiesa Cattolica Romana. Perciò si protesta che le parole Fato, Destino, Numi, e cose simili sono state da lui adoperate per semplice, e favoloso abbellimento poetico, non intendendo di pregiudicare quanto all'Evangelica Verità, che ha sempre portato, e porterà radicata nel cuore sino alla morte" (*Rime del signor Gio. Battista Grappelli [...]*. Rome 1697, f. A5<sup>r</sup>).

26 See for instance the *Proteste* imposed in October 1644 by the Congregation of the Index upon the book *Ambrosianae mediolani Basilicae et monasterii hodie cisterciensis monumenta* by Giovanni Pietro Puricelli; cf. Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede [= ACDF], Index, Diari VI, fol. 104<sup>r</sup>-105<sup>r</sup>.

27 On Loredan, see the recent entry by Clizia Carminati in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 65. Rome 2005, pp. 761-770.

Padua.<sup>28</sup> The Venetian aristocrat directed all his contempt at the poor Franciscan, who had been charged with reviewing as a censor a collection of short stories written by the *Incogniti* in 1650, and had dared to delete eight passages from the two introductory stories written by Loredan himself. This offence to his honour as a good Catholic and a prominent patrician provoked him into writing and subsequently printing the letter in which he gave an articulate lesson in censorial techniques to the censor himself.

First of all, the poetic lexicon (the traditional references to the object of carnal love as a goddess) which was scrutinised and finally condemned by the friar did not undermine the purity of the Catholic faith. Moreover, “even if he had had scruples about it, a simple Protestation would have served the goal perfectly.”<sup>29</sup> This observation introduced a political remark which was not at all surprising in the writing of a Venetian patrician. If there was no offence to the Catholic faith, the censor did not have the right to interfere, as moral and political matters concerned only the state magistrates. Finally, the censor was only an expert delegated by the Inquisitor. He did not have the right to make any decisions but only to relate his opinion to the Holy Office. The conclusion was a frank and direct threat to the censor: “In writing you this letter, I wanted to comply with one of the works of mercy. In fact, I am sure that you erred because of your simplicity and not out of malice. In any case, watch out that your scruples do not make you indiscreet. In fact, to notice that you suppressed only my eight passages, among the 87 considered erroneous could make me impatient on the next occasion. May our Lord make you judicious and preserve your health.”<sup>30</sup>

This letter astonishes modern readers on numerous levels. The first estrangement effect stems from the complete reversal of the expected situation: here it is the censored who seems to have the upper hand, not the faceless censor. It is not only a question of power. Loredan shows a refined knowledge of the rules and teaches the friar how to correctly apply the methods of censorship. The alienation thus becomes complete: one of the most famous Italian “libertines” turned into an instructor, although a rather particular one, of censorial practices. And this is precisely the point: Loredan does not express any official rebellion against

28 Letter to the Father Lecturer of Philosophy in the Seminary of Saint Anthony, without date, in *Lettere del signor Gio. Francesco Loredano Nobile Veneto [...] Quinta impressione*. Venice 1655, pp. 298–300.

29 “[...] quando ci fosse scrupolo, una semplice Protesta supplirebbe d'avvantaggio”: ibid., p. 299.

30 “Ho voluto avvertirnela con la presente per esercitare una dell'opere della misericordia, sicuro che ha peccato per semplicità, non per malitia. Stij però avvertita che li scrupuli non la rendano indiscreta; perché il vedere, in 87 luoghi segnati, solamente aboliti gl'otto che sono miei, mi potrebbe in altra occasione far dare nell'impatienza. N. S. la rendi prudente, e la conservi sana”: ibid., p. 300.

Roman censorship and its theological control, while simultaneously attempting to change it from the inside.

As is already patently clear, Loredan's letter is an extraordinary example of the complex relationships between norms, languages and social agency at the core of early modern institutions. On one hand, the norm does not disappear; quite the opposite, it is accepted, mastered and instrumentally used by Loredan, who takes possession of the language of censorship and manipulates it at will. In fact, Loredan does not convey in his writings the heterodox doctrines improperly for a member of the ruling class – this is the task of other, less prominent members of the *Accademia degli Incogniti* – while majestically boasting his exemption from the rule. On the other hand, the letter makes evident that the actions of individuals had a decisive role in censorial practice. Consequently, it would be a mistake to narrow our view to the institutions without considering the network of relations and the wider context, especially when the institution in question is the Inquisition, an apparatus ramified all around Italy: Venice was very different from Modena, the city of Tassoni, or from Rome, the seat of the papal Curia.

One might argue that Loredan's menacing words were useless, given that the censored work had already been published. Such an objection would surely be short-sighted. The letter speaks to the future, not to the past, and aims at reaffirming Loredan's power in a moment of difficulty. The Republic of Venice was tightening her alliance with Rome, from where it expected precious help against the Ottoman troops during the Cretan War. At that moment, it was of primary importance to the Republic to present itself as the champion of Christendom and orthodoxy by reducing the intellectual freedom of the *Incogniti*, which until then had been guaranteed. In these years the Academy printer, Francesco Valvasense, was tried by the Inquisition for the first time, after 30 years of more or less illicit activity.<sup>31</sup> Although the penalties were not terribly severe, Loredan saw his dominion vacillating, and his letter, which he unsurprisingly decided to publish, was a riposte intended to reassert his rank as a powerful Maecenas.

Once again, Loredan was an important nobleman who lived in the most independent Italian state, famous for its jurisdictional struggles with the Holy See. Tassoni did not reach the same social rank as that of Loredan, but some of his letters, letters which he never published, are written in a similar tone with respect to Roman censorship. In all of these cases and in many others, authors did not speak out against censorship as such, but were ironically cooperating to find the proper balance and combination between norm and consensus.

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<sup>31</sup> Infelise, Mario: Books and Politics in Arcangela Tarabotti's Venice, in: Weaver, Elizabeth B. (ed.): *Arcangela Tarabotti. A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*. Ravenna 2006, pp. 57–72.

### 7.5.4 The Ambiguity of Censorship: A Common Ground for a Comparative History of Censorship

In the rooms of the Vatican Congregations, this continuous exchange of roles between censors and authors was a matter of everyday life, although it may seem incongruous by current standards. Borrowing a decidedly *etic* term,<sup>32</sup> scholars of early modern English censorship have described these fluid relationships between authors and censors, which they studied in another context, through the concept of “functional ambiguity”. The perspective of the so-called new censorship historians corresponds with the approach adopted in these pages in emphasising the pragmatic, situational character of censorial practice,<sup>33</sup> while diverging on the meaning given to the word “ambiguity”, a particularly useful label in describing the many varieties of early modern society. In my view, ambiguity is not a term of formal logic and does not mean *Mehrdeutigkeit*, that is, the presence of plural meanings.<sup>34</sup> Ambiguity serves as a concept which aims to show the duplicity of behaviours and procedures, and the doubts about norms which arise from social confrontations. Roman censors, as well as many other members of early modern institutions, disputed – this is the first meaning of the Latin word *ambigere* – with authors, printers, etc., inside and outside the papal palaces, both within and away from Rome, in order to find the right, though often duplicitous and protean, solutions for particular situations. Above all, the idea of ambiguity can offer a first definition and a fruitful starting point for a broader comparison between Roman censorship and other censorial apparatuses of early modern Europe.

The pioneer of New Censorship studies, Annabel Patterson, has focused on the ambiguity of language employed by authors and readers in order to interpret the text “between the lines” and elude censorship.<sup>35</sup> In Patterson’s view, the first

<sup>32</sup> On *emic/etic* distinctions, see Ginzburg, Carlo: Our Words and Theirs. A Reflection on the Historian’s Craft, Today, in: Fellman, Susanna/Rahikainen, Marjatta (eds.): *Historical Knowledge. In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*. Cambridge 2012, pp. 97–120.

<sup>33</sup> On the English New Censorship school, see Shuger, Barbara: *Censorship and Cultural Sensibility. The Regulation of Language in Tudor-Stuart England*. Philadelphia 2006.

<sup>34</sup> For this approach, see Bauer, Thomas: *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*. Berlin 2011; and Pietsch, Andreas/Stollberg-Rilinger, Barbara (eds.): *Konfessionelle Ambiguität. Uneindeutigkeit und Verstellung als religiöse Praxis in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Gütersloh 2013.

<sup>35</sup> One of Patterson’s sources of inspiration was surely Strauss, Leo: *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Glencoe 1952, although she marks a substantial difference between her interpretative proposal and Strauss’ research (see the new introduction to the second edition of *Censorship and Interpretation. The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England*. Madison 1994, pp. 24–25). Her main criticism concerns the purely philosophical character of Strauss’ proposal of an esoteric reading, while he ignores the contextualized, exoteric perspective. As we shall see, this criticism could, to a certain degree, be turned against Patterson herself.

defence against censorship was the “indeterminacy inveterate to language”.<sup>36</sup> However, such incisive observations cannot hide the fact that reality was far more complex than that. First of all, the relationship between authors and readers was shaped by many intermediate steps, which tend to be overlooked in this interpretation primarily grounded on linguistic ambiguity. Economic and institutional aspects were almost completely neglected while it was forgotten that censors were first of all readers – in fact, they were the first readers of a work, and the only readers of whom authors could be certain.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, censors shared with readers the same tools for decoding the hidden messages of texts. As has already been seen, Roman as well as French, Spanish, and English censors were not obtuse bureaucrats but men of letters, who were both readers and authors in their own right. If such a functional ambiguity existed, it has to be understood in a broader sense which combines linguistic, social, and institutional aspects.

In other words, the ambiguity of censorship was its indistinctness in the web of relationships formed by the “communications circuit” as a whole, in which censors, authors, printers and booksellers took part side by side. Obviously, the relationships between them were not always symmetrical, but mostly duplicitous and variable.<sup>38</sup> In sum, censors could be both authors and readers at the same time, guardians and thieves, or clients and patrons, acting in different ways according to their changing positions. Therefore, the ambiguity of censorship did not reside only in different social statuses as such, but also in the agency of the actors, capable of situating their own roles in different ways. Whether we look at the phenomenon as the action enforced within the institutions or as a strategy of individuals, agency helped to rearticulate norms, granting them a space of ambiguity which in turn made them even more effective.

These sketchy observations aim at finding common ground for a comparative history of censorial apparatuses in early modern Europe. Taking for granted that the old evolutionist image of a decaying Catholic South and a prosperous “land of the free”, corresponding to the Protestant North, has definitively disappeared from historiographical discourse, the question concerns the possibility

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Substantial corrections to these limitations can be found in subsequent works devoted to early modern England: see Dutton, Richard: *Mastering the Revels. The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama*. Iowa City 1991; Clegg, Cynthia S.: *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England*. Cambridge 1997; ead.: *Press Censorship in Jacobean England*. Cambridge 2001; ead.: *Press Censorship in Carolean England*. Cambridge 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Tortarolo, Edoardo: Introduction, to the special issue of the *Journal of Modern European History* 3 (2005), pp. 18–22, dedicated to “Censorship in Early Modern Europe”.

of a comparative history of censorship *tout court*.<sup>39</sup> How to find a common ground of interpretation between state and ecclesiastical institutions, or pre- and post-publication censorship? What might be the connecting point between the more open regime developed in England during the seventeenth century and the strict continental ones?

An answer might come from a relational analysis, which, taking advantage of some similarities existing throughout Western Europe, focuses first on the agency of different actors. In fact, the printing press was an extraordinary phenomenon which appeared at nearly the same moment and in the same form all over the continent, imposing itself in different societies and states. In the Western world, institutions dealing with censorship and laws regulating print were created more or less in the same decades between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and mirrored analogous concerns. Although many circumstances were highly specific and subsequent developments widened the divide from this initial situation onwards, parallels continued to exist thanks both to this common origin and to the survival of a trans-confessional, pan-European organisation of knowledge through academies, personal contacts, and the like. The analysis of a social agency which operates through norms, cultural and political patronage etc., may offer a valuable connecting point, an *Ansatzpunkt*, for a larger synthetic view. In this case, a micro-analytical gaze could prove a useful tool for macro-analytical comparisons.

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<sup>39</sup> Beyond the special issue of the *Journal of Modern European History* quoted above, a first attempt at a comparative history in eighteenth-century Europe can be found in Tortarolo, Edoardo (ed.): *La censura nel secolo dei Lumi. Una visione internazionale*. Turin 2011.