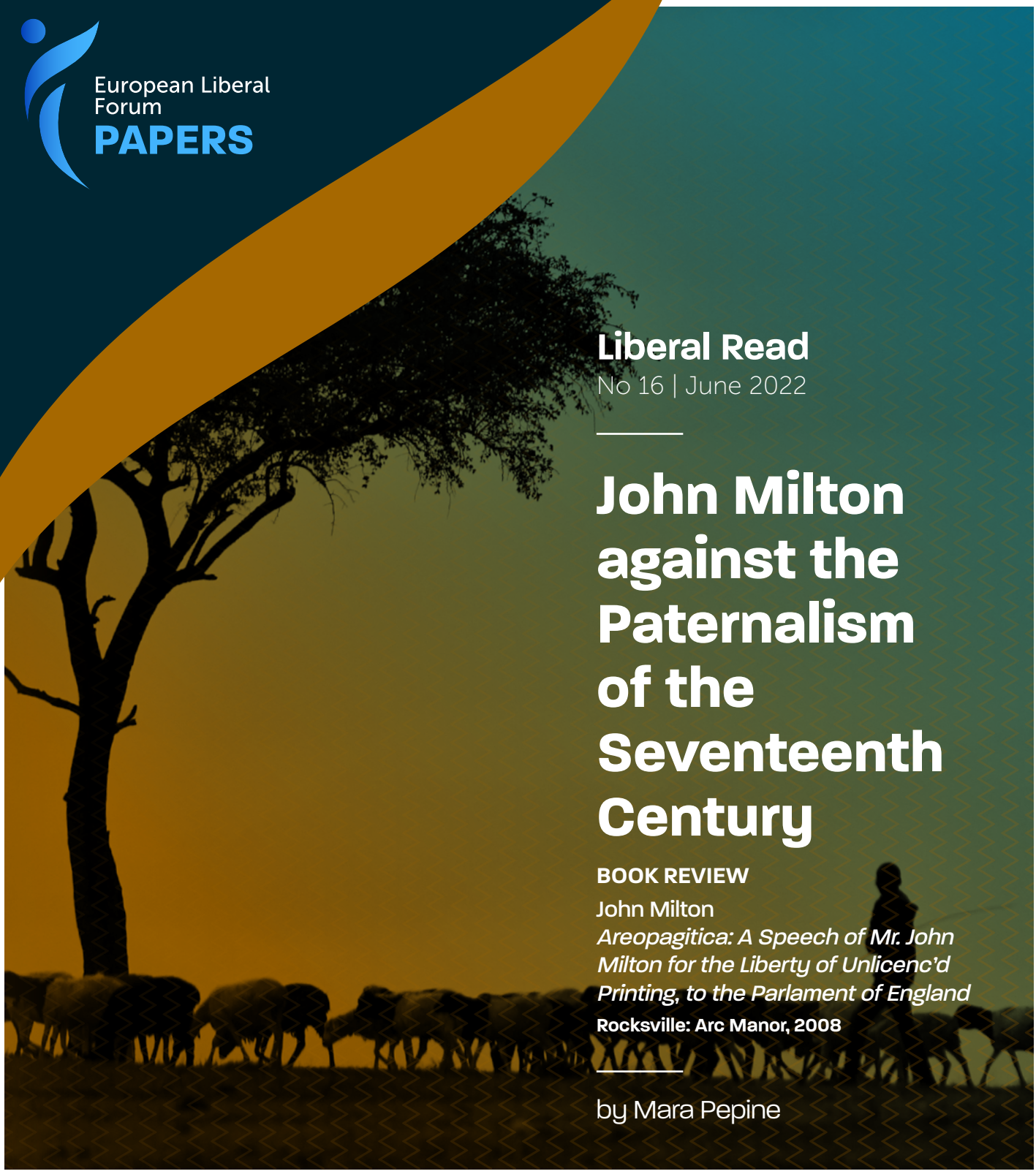
European Liberal Forum
PAPERS



Liberal Read

No 16 | June 2022

John Milton against the Paternalism of the Seventeenth Century

BOOK REVIEW

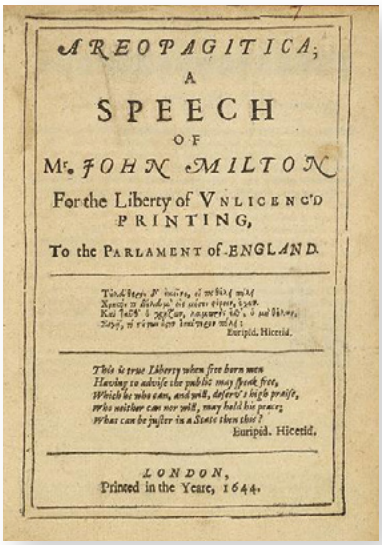
John Milton
Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parlament of England
Rocksville: Arc Manor, 2008

by Mara Pepine

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

John Milton against the Paternalism of the Seventeenth Century


AREOPAGITICA;
A
SPEECH
OF
Mr. JOHN MILTON
For the Liberty of VNLICENC'D
PRINTING,
To the PARLAMENT of ENGLAND.

Euripid. Hicetid.

This is true Liberty when free born men
Having to advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State then this?
Euripid. Hicetid.

LONDON,
Printed in the Yeare, 1644.

A bit of history

The early half of the seventeenth century in England was marked by Charles I's rule, the English Civil War, and following it the Cromwellian regime. The English Civil War had its roots in a religious war between Catholics and Protestants, a conflict that defines much of English history. Once the Protestants came into power, they abolished the monarchy and replaced it with parliamentary rule.

During its dismantling of the English monarchy, the Protestant Parliament also went about dismantling the Star Chamber. The Star Chamber was an English court founded in the late fifteenth century whose original goal was that of supplementing the activities of other courts by targeting powerful individuals who might be able to intimidate the rest of the system into not prosecuting them. However, it soon morphed into an organ of the state responsible for abuses of power, e.g. imposing excessive punishments, which prompted the passage of the Habeas Corpus Act. Its abolition in 1641 was a very important step towards eliminating the unjust rule of the monarchy. However, the passage of the Licensing Order of 1643 showed that the Parliament was more interested in a transfer of power rather than in eliminating the abusive structures themselves. The law ensured the pre-publication censorship of books in England. As a response to the Licensing Order, in November 1644, the English poet and intellectual John Milton, who was a big supporter of and a key actor in the Cromwellian regime, published Areopagitica: *A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parlament of England*. His speech, which addresses the Protestant-led Parliament directly, is an open criticism of the Licensing Order and the paternalistic approach of the legislative body. The title *Areopagitica* also refers to this: an Areopagite was a member of the Areopagus, the judicial council of ancient Athens.

Opening remarks

Milton, an admirer of ancient Greek society, opens his speech with a quote from Euripides, stating that true freedom can only be achieved in the presence of freedom of speech. He goes on to assure his intended audience that he is not brazenly addressing them out of entitlement; he is more than aware of the risks his endeavour involves but he feels

so passionately about the topic of freedom that he considers it his duty towards the betterment of his society. Liberty, in his words is after all not the absence of problems in a certain regime, but the ability to point out those problems and swiftly solve them.

In order to cushion what might have been seen as a blow to the authority of the newly established Parliament, Milton continues with a brief exposition of what constitutes praise, laying out three criteria: the object of praise must be worthy of praise, it must truly show the positive aspect that makes it praiseworthy, and the one praising it must avoid empty flattery. He concludes that offering advice is a much higher form of praise than flattery, and as such the Parliament should receive his speech as praise rather than criticism. By accepting and paying attention to what he has to say, Milton assures the Parliament, it would distance itself even more from the corrupt monarchy that craved flattery, and instead emulate the ancient Greeks who took into consideration the insights of learned people.

After taking these precautions, Milton brings up the topic of his speech: the Licensing Order of 1643. He chooses to err on the side of caution rather than risk being misunderstood and angering the stern Members of Parliament. As such, he explains that he finds certain clauses of the Licensing Order appropriate, indicating those that preserve the copyrights of authors and publishers and that aim to ensure that poorer people have access to literature. His only real problem lies with the clause that enforces pre-publication censorship, carried out directly under the supervision of Parliament.

Milton's next outlines his argument, meant to prevent the lawmakers – whom he asserts he holds in high regard – from making a mistake. He breaks it down into four points: The first is that censorship of the written word is an essentially papist invention and as such should be automatically repulsive to the Protestant Members of Parliament. Milton's second point concerns why exactly people engage with texts. Third, the Licensing Order would not actually affect those works it was meant to target. Finally, enforcing such an order would stop all learning and discovery in their tracks, and ultimately obscure the truth itself.

Censorship: an instrument of the Pope

As an introduction to his first point, Milton explains why he finds the idea of eliminating books so despicable by presenting his own opinion that destroying a book is tantamount to or even worse than killing a human being, as it entails eradicating not a living thing, but 'an immortality', 'reason itself' and as such is a direct attack on God.[1]

Milton calls the licensing of books a 'Spanish' idea, referring to its roots (in his opinion) in the institution of the Inquisition. In order to prove his point that the licensing of books is an inherently inquisitorial practice that deserves condemnation, he reviews the state of censorship of the written word throughout history, starting from ancient Athens. He notes that works were only banned because they were considered either blasphemous or libellous. In all other matters, the leaders of Athens and even Sparta didn't interfere and allowed authors essentially unlimited freedom of expression.

1 J. Milton 2008, p.12.

He again mentions how, before the Catholic Church became an important political player in Europe, the 'birthing' of books was as unregulated as that of children and likens pre-publishing censorship to the judgement of a soul before its birth.

Milton's distaste for Roman society is apparent – he doesn't shy away from calling them uncultured and overly focused on military matters. However, even they, Milton says, only bothered to ban books that were explicitly libellous. Even after the Roman Emperors converted to Christianity, of the Roman Emperors the lax attitude continued, with the state only banning outright the works of the 'grand heretics' and pagan authors who wrote explicitly against Christianity.

Disregarding the already numerous examples of books that were indeed banned in ancient times, Milton states that censorship only came about with the creation of the – primarily political and only then religious – institution of the papacy in 800 AD. He says that censorship only affected heretical works at first, but soon also started to target Reformist books that criticised the corruption surrounding the Papal seat and the Catholic Church in general. Milton brings up the Council of Trent (considered the Catholic Church's prime counter-reformation measure) and the Inquisition, which compiled lists of banned books that not just contained heretical ideas but anything that didn't strike their fancy.

Turning his attention next to the licensing practised subsequently by the Catholic Church, he mentions the practice of writing an *imprimatur* – Latin for 'approval for printing' – claiming that the word is untranslatable in English as it is incompatible with the language's propensity for freedom. He again mentions how, before the Catholic Church became an important political player in Europe, the 'birthing' of books was as unregulated as that of children and likens pre-publishing censorship to the judgement of a soul before its birth.

As Milton concludes his first point, he seems to again remember whom he is addressing and takes further measures to protect himself from any potential offence that the Members of Parliament might take. He claims that the proposal and passage of the Licensing Order did not imply any malicious intent on their part. He even offers a counterargument in favour of those who might still uphold the idea of licensing books, despite the practice's tyrannical past. Sure, he agrees, bad people can have good ideas. However, licensing is not a very complex concept and, historically speaking, societies that avoided such measures flourished, while those that relied heavily on them were particularly oppressive.

The pursuit of knowledge should be unimpeded

In his second point, Milton seeks to show that reading what the Parliament might consider 'undesirable' books isn't necessarily detrimental. He cites the examples of various figures in Christian history to show that while God endorses acquainting oneself with all manner of knowledge, it is the devil's wish to deprive people of it. He offers as a parallel the perspective on eating meat in Christianity: essentially God leaves it to the discretion

of people to decide what meat to consume, overriding the rules imposed in the Old Testament. Milton claims that this gives people the opportunity to practice Christian virtues by not overindulging, and that the same applies to the pursuit of knowledge. He even humorously adds that had God wanted people to only have access to a certain type of books, He would have compiled a list.

To support his argument, Milton recalls the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, which endowed people with the knowledge of good and evil. Milton highlights that in the human world, good and evil do not exist as separate entities, but are always inextricably linked. He stresses that virtue in a vacuum, not tested by temptation, is superficial – not true virtue but a pale copy. True virtue comes not from isolation in a protective bubble, but from confronting and surpassing the temptation of sins and vices. It is an excellent argument against paternalism from a Christian perspective and can be applied in other contexts as well. Milton goes so far as to say that only by engaging with all manner of books can one truly exercise virtue.

Milton takes the time to anticipate and pre-emptively refute potential counterarguments. The first such concern is the possibility of moral corruption that 'unsanctioned' books bring with them. Milton responds to this by reminding his audience that the Bible itself contains numerous examples of unvirtuous behaviour and problematic language, and asserts that the arbitrary criteria imposed by the censorship office are so strict as to be ridiculous.

Regarding books written in English, in particular, Milton points out that the ones that pose the biggest problem – those about religious controversy –have the greatest destructive potential mainly target educated people. He adds that banning books in English would be absolutely useless in a fight against evil and dangerous ideas, as these ideas can cross borders and can originate in the minds and hearts of evil people even without access to books. Pointing out that those with more education, and as such more contact with books that might need to be banned, are the ones most susceptible to disseminate those dangerous ideas among the masses, Milton poses a question to his audience: could the Members of Parliament trust the licensers, who would have unlimited access to every written work in the country?

Milton stresses that wisdom and virtue on one hand and foolishness and vice on the other exist as such even in the absence of books, so any censorship in the effort to hinder the spread of evil would be ultimately useless. Addressing the famous example of censorship in Plato's Republic that encourages the censorship of fictional works for the purpose of instilling virtue in the hearts and minds of the youth, Milton argues that the *Republic* is a work of fiction depicting a utopia and that Plato himself did not support the idea of censorship in real life.

Freedom of choice versus paternalism

Milton continues the argument that vice and virtue are not affected by the censorship of books, pointing out other areas of daily life where virtue and temptation intersect and where the intervention of the Parliament would be at best ineffectual and at worst laughable: music, dance, indulging in food and drink in private homes or establishments, or fashion. Milton claims that while many vices do exist in such realms, the sign of a great

regime is the ability to draw the line between areas in which legislation is necessary and those where it would be futile.

Returning to paternalism, Milton argues that if all areas of life where temptation can appear are so tightly regulated that people live in absolute and perpetual virtue, that would not be real virtue and the people not praiseworthy as would have done no more than be led like cattle. Milton stresses the freedom of choice, dismissing those who misunderstand (deliberately or not) the reason God let Adam and Eve taste the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. Without the choice between good and evil, people have no occasion to show virtue and resist temptation. The removal of free choice is as such a direct act against God and the Licensing Order of 1643, to Milton, falls into this category.

Milton argues that if all areas of life where temptation can appear are so tightly regulated that people live in absolute and perpetual virtue, that would not be real virtue and the people not praiseworthy as they would have done no more than be led like cattle.

Milton also offers some contemporary examples and points out to the Members of Parliament the failure of the Licensing Order to stop pro-monarchy underground publications. He adds that in order for censorship to achieve its desired effect, it would have to be much more discerning and occasionally censor only parts of books. The next logical step would be to take control of all printing presses, which, Milton reminds his audience, would be uncomfortably reminiscent of the Inquisition and the counter-reformation measures of the Catholic Church. In fact, to continue with it would undermine the Licensing Act's purported objective of discouraging schismatic behaviour in the Protestant Church of England, as many religious minorities preferred to transmit their traditions orally. He also claims that in order to fully achieve what the Parliament had in mind, the licensers would have to be exceptional intellectuals, but such people would be uninterested in the role. Milton excludes those occupying that position at the time from that narrative, suggesting that they accepted the position as a sign of allegiance to the Protestant regime.

Counter-intuitive consequences

Milton's final point is that introducing pre-publishing censure will discourage learning and the pursuit of knowledge. He addresses the clergy's claim that if their resources were cut by the state, learning would suffer, pointing out that those who learn out of pure love of knowledge are the best intellectuals and that for those carrying out God's will to censor such people would be an unforgivable offence.

Censorship, Milton argues, destroys critical thinking and intellectual inclinations. When interacting with a text, the intellectual thoroughly uses their critical thinking skills and consults with those who know the subject in a way that the licenser. Furthermore, pre-publishing censorship stifles the revision process in which a writer might want

to engage and would result in books of poorer quality. Licensing would diminish the authority of writers, marking them as puppets of those in power, unable to express what they really think. And any censorship of the works of dead authors would destroy their legacy, while living authors have to contend with the sad prospect of eventually being subjected to the same treatment.

Milton also expresses the opinion that censorship in the form of licensing isn't detrimental only to a few intellectuals but to the entire English nation, as a limited number of licensers couldn't possibly begin to have a comprehensive overview of the knowledge possessed by all its citizens. Even those who aren't well enough educated to be writers themselves would suffer from being denied the freedom to choose their own reading material. In fact, to treat those people as incapable of reading 'unacceptable' literature could be considered a slight against the clergy, as it would imply that the ministers were incapable of instilling proper virtues in the public.

When the measures used by tyrannical regimes are applied, Milton declares, no one can claim that there are good intentions behind them. He cites examples of other countries where censorship flourished and intellectual life declined severely. He mentions having visited Galileo during his imprisonment and laments that he hadn't expected to see those oppressive measures being taken in his own country, especially after having the monarchy was toppled. He adds that his view is shared by all scholars. Furthermore, he fears the unintended consequence of differences of opinion emerging among the clergymen and of a Church built on fear and mistrust, which would only bring the Protestants closer to the dreaded Catholic model.

Milton notes that virtues are like muscles; they require exercise. Holding a belief just because it is endorsed by those in power and not as a result of one's own judgement, even if it is the correct and righteous belief, is still an act of heresy. Licensing would lead to a stagnant society in which the flow of truth would be impeded. After the ascension of Christ, Milton says, truth was split into innumerable pieces by 'a wicked race of deceivers'. Those who wish to behold the truth's glorious form (as would behove any good Christian) must constantly sift through the masses of content produced by humanity in search of the little nuggets of truth that may be hiding in them.

Milton ends his speech by reminding his audience that by having achieved the feat of overthrowing the abusive monarchy, they now have a responsibility to other nations to lead by example. He also reminds them of the methods that the Protestants had used to reach this enviable political situation: acting expressly against the licensing rules put in place by Charles I. Finally, Milton concludes that the Members of Parliament, being wise, would hear his appeal and regift to the English nation its freedom of speech.

European Liberal Forum
PAPERS

ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 47 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

/europeanliveralforum
@eurliberalforum
#ELFpaper

liberalforum.eu

COVER IMAGE by Pawan Sharma on Unsplash

This publication was co-financed by the European Parliament. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it.