

12th October 2023

Censorship

**“What progress we are making! In the Middle Ages they would have burned me.
Now they are content with burning my books.”**

Sigmund Freud, *Letter to Ernest Jones (1933)*

I was intrigued, and disturbed, by a recent news report concerning State censorship. A photograph of Chinese sprinters hugging has been censored, not on the grounds of impropriety, but for another, more sinister, reason. The athlete, Lin Yuwei, was emotionally celebrating her gold medal in the 100 metres hurdles with Wu Yanni at the Asian Games. However, after a few hours, the image was removed by Chinese media. The two athletes had raced in lanes 6 and 4, clearly shown in the photo by the numbers they're wearing. But while that seems innocuous, Beijing has outlawed these numbers on social media due to their link to the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre, June 4, 1989, when Chinese troops shot dead pro-democracy protesters. 6 & 4 should never be seen together.

This, in all sanity, is State censorship of the most worrying kind. And while we might be inclined to dismiss it as “singularly stupid”, or “it’s only sport”, or “another conspiracy theory”, or “this is China, for goodness’ sake”, it raises for me more general questions about censorship.

Take, for example, the worrying trend in schools where teachers are disinclined to allow children to read material which might by some be considered “inappropriate” for a more “enlightened” generation. The children’s author, Judy Blume, in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, as far back as 1997, said: “It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers.” And a few years earlier in *Good Advice*, William Safire quoted her as saying: “Let children read whatever they want and then talk about it with them. If parents and kids can talk together, we won’t have as much censorship because we won’t have as much fear.”

All censorship is a blight on a free society. We have a responsibility to be open with each other, including our children, and talk things through. But don’t let the State, China or anywhere else, determine what’s right or wrong for us. Let “6” and “4” be part of our learning, openness, *and* our emotional celebrations, no matter what.

A prayer for today

Lord, you offer me freedom. Help me – help us – to use it well. Amen

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