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The Authoritarian's Worst Fear? A Book

Governments are spending a remarkable amount of resources attacking books — because their supposed limitations are beginning to look like ageless strengths.

By Duncan White

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Around the world, many authoritarian regimes — having largely corralled the internet — now have declared war on the written word, their oldest enemy. The received wisdom after the close of the Cold War was that physical books were outdated, soon to be swept aside in the digital age; and that the internet was instead the real threat to governments seeking to repress provocative thinking. A generation later, the opposite may be true.

The People's Republic of China has been the most successful in curbing the internet. But their stranglehold on society is also the result of their largely successful push in the past decade to ban nearly all bookstores, books, authors and academics that do not adhere to the Communist Party's line. Even before the current Hong Kong protests, there was a crackdown on Hong Kong publishers. In the fall of 2015, associates of the Causeway Bay Books store disappeared, later discovered to have been detained on the mainland, accused of trafficking in "illegal" books critiquing leading members of the Communist Party. In 2017, the Communist Party formally took control of all print media, including books.

They are, of course, far from alone. Wherever authoritarian regimes are growing in strength, from Brazil, to Hungary, to the Philippines, literature that expresses any kind of political opposition is under a unique, renewed threat. Books that challenge normative values, especially those with L.G.B.T. themes, have been hit especially hard. History textbooks crafted by independent scholars are being replaced with those produced by the state at a disturbing rate. In Russia, a new even stricter set of censorship laws was announced in March to punish those expressing "clear disrespect" for the state (i.e. effectively Putin himself).

During the Cold War that followed, the federal government established a network of 181 libraries and reading rooms in over 80 countries. In 1955, specially-made lightweight copies of Animal Farm were flown from West Germany into Poland by balloon. The unifying principle — despite the terrible hypocrisy of Jim Crow — was that freedom of thought abroad would ultimately favor the spread of tolerant, free liberal democracies.

The United States was not always on the side of the angels in the Cold War and in Latin America presidents have backed authoritarian regimes at the expense of dissidents. But Jimmy Carter, for instance, forcefully defended playwright Vaclav Havel and his fellow Czechoslovak dissidents in the late 1970s, even when it imperiled his foreign policy of détente.

The tepid response of the Trump administration to the murder and dismemberment of the Saudi critic Jamal Khashoggi is just the most egregious example of why the global defense of freedom of the press and speech is no longer an American priority. The State Department has made barely a peep about any of this. Perhaps it should come as no surprise coming from a president who is almost comically boastful about his antipathy to reading.

Not that literary dissidents are helpless. As the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who himself died in a Soviet gulag, is said to have put it: “If they’re killing people for poetry, that means they honor and esteem it, they fear it, that means poetry is power.” The perverse logic of censorship is that in attempting to repress literature, it lures a new generation of dissidents.

The age-old strategy of “samizdat,” clandestine self-publishing, is mobilizing once again. Even in North Korea, where the pseudonymous author “Bandi” managed to smuggle out a collection of stories and poems to the West.

The consequences of America standing by apathetically could be disastrous — particularly if Mr. Trump and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, remain in power for another four years. In classic dystopian novels of the near-future — “Brave New World,” “1984,” “Fahrenheit 451” — the digital world is ubiquitous. The ghostly absence of books, and the freethinking they seed, is the nightmare. For much of the world, it’s not an impossible fate

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