

Foreword

Within any given society, the strength of public memories of the origins of freedom of expression is a vital measure of its living force in the present. The equation is clear: political orders which are dismissive or ignorant of the history of the ideal of free expression typically misunderstand or suppress its present-day relevance. It is perhaps therefore a sign of the times that the young scholar Xiaokun Wu has written the first-ever Chinese-language account of the emergence of the ideals and language of freedom of expression in modern Britain. Her choice of the British case is well-founded, for it was within this country, from the early 17th century onwards, the European principle was for the first time most carefully defined, and most fiercely defended, often with positive public effect.

Wu's story is as fascinating as it is impressive. It has great relevance for several scholarly disciplines, including history, political science, philosophy, journalism and communications. Her method of combining the analysis of texts, many of them unknown to Chinese readers, with accounts of the contexts in which they arose, and were debated, is innovative. Wu pinpoints three historical episodes in the grand drama that turned 'liberty of the press' and 'liberty of expression' into a vibrant, living principle. She shows how in practice the principle scared tyrants and posed important questions about such matters as religious toleration, copyright law and the reporting of parliamentary proceedings. Wu skilfully analyses the various motives that inspired publicists to stand up for the principle; and she emphasises, in a commentary on theories of modernisation, that in the British context struggles for freedom of expression played a vital role in the formation of markets and the institutions of constitutional government.

It is worth emphasising that Wu's study is by no means an exercise in dusty antiquarianism. Her interest in the subject of freedom of expression is rather guided, understandably, by the premise that the process of re-considering and re-evaluating 'western' principles and institutions is a live public issue in contemporary China. For this reason alone, Wu's book deserves a wide audience. But there is another, less

obvious reason why her path-breaking study deserves close attention. By demonstrating so clearly that the earliest British defences of press freedom relied on foundational claims that were not always mutually consistent - Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian case for a free press differed markedly from both the rights-based defence championed by Thomas Paine and William Walwyn's theological justification - Wu calls on her readers to think for themselves about why freedom of expression is important in the 21st century. Her study in effect prompts readers to ask: what can be learned from past justifications of freedom of expression? Can these old languages of liberty be revived, either in substance or spirit? Do they still have relevance for the much-changed circumstances of our 21st-century world?

Many observers will today still agree with the early British champions of freedom of expression that it remains a potent weapon of the weak and the disadvantaged against the intolerant and the powerful, a means of preventing or minimising bossing and bullying. But might it also be that one of the fruits of revisiting the old languages of liberty, as Wu has done so insightfully, is the inspiration to redefine in fresh ways the meaning and value of freedom of expression not just for Europeans, but for all peoples on our planet? In the early years of the 21st-century, for instance, might freedom of expression be an indispensable early warning mechanism, a means of damage control, a way of enabling individuals, groups, networks and whole organisations to sound the alarm when they suspect that others are causing them harm?

John Keane

University of Sydney

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