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Commentary

Principles of freedom crushed by intolerance

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Nina Sanadze at home surrounded by her sculptures and drawings.

Image: Lillie Thompson

As this paper reported last weekend, Nina Sanadze, a well-known Australian sculptor, has been hounded out of Melbourne's Gertrude Studio for refusing to denounce Israel and endorse the massacre Hamas perpetrated on October 7, 2023.

The move follows a concerted campaign launched after the "doxxing" in January last year of a group of Jewish creative artists by a reporter from The New York Times.

Fuelling that campaign was a statement, issued by the National Association for the Visual Arts, asserting that "armed attacks on October 7 by Palestinian people cannot be de-contextualised from 75 years of settler colonialism". While never even naming Hamas – much less mentioning its atrocities – the statement urged artists to act in whatever way they could to "stop Israel's genocide in Gaza".

With [Sanadze](#) being identified in the doxxing as one of the five most prominent Australian Jewish artists, Gertrude came under enormous pressure to exclude her from its facilities – pressures to which it eventually succumbed.

Unfortunately, Sanadze's "cancelling" is only the latest instance of a far broader assault on artistic freedom.

Historically, artists campaigned for the right to create unhampered by social and political pressure. Works were to be judged strictly on their merits, not on the basis of the views or character of their creator; and equally, creators were not to be prosecuted, punished or proscribed merely because their works offended some and appalled others. In short, the artistic and literary arena was to be one in which all artists and works could contend.

Now, those principles have been buried. Echoing the fatwa the ayatollah Khomeini issued in 1989 condemning Salman Rushdie, some 7000 writers called last October for all the creators who had not "publicly recognised the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as enshrined in international law", or who were in other ways "complicit" with Israel, to be effectively erased from the public sphere.



"Zio Dogs" graffiti at Gertrude Contemporary the day artist Sanadze was moving sculptures for an exhibition.

Of course, ostracising the voices with which one disagrees is nothing new. Indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville, who was fully familiar with its antecedents in classical Greece, foresaw the danger of a new form of ostracism emerging in a world increasingly shaped by public opinion.

Already at the beginning of the 19th century, Hegel had warned about the ambivalence of public opinion's sway, describing its immense force as deserving to be "despised as well as respected". Some years later, Tocqueville, witnessing the attacks being launched in the US by the Jacksonian populists against their political opponents, feared that public opinion's overwhelming force would inaugurate an age in which dissidents were banished into oblivion.

"The master," he wrote in one of *Democracy in America*'s most chilling passages, "no longer says: think as I do or die. He says: You are free not to think as I do; but from this day forth you shall be a stranger among us. When you approach your fellow creatures, they will shun you. And even those who believe in your innocence will abandon you, lest they too, be shunned in turn. No, I will not take your life; but the life I leave you with is worse than death."

Tocqueville's nightmare had an immense impact on liberal thinkers, beginning with John Stuart Mill. Especially when it is whipped into a frenzy, Mill grimly noted, public opinion can impose "a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself".

And whenever that "spirit of intolerant mediocrity" was allowed to prevail, irresistible impetus would be given to the "ever-flowing current of human affairs toward the worse".

There is, nonetheless, a crucial respect in which our current predicament contradicts the 19th-century liberals' projections. The risks public opinion posed, they believed, lay in the uneducated masses, who were less likely to be moved by reason than by emotion. That is why Mill considered it essential to ensure the "intelligent" could resist the "democracy of mere numbers" by granting greater voting power to "the more educated, more intrinsically valuable members of society" – at least until universal education had made "the lower classes" less vulnerable to fanaticism.

But the lynch mobs that now dominate the public sphere are not populated by the least educated majority of the population. They are, on the contrary, largely comprised of a narrow minority of graduates, who – according to the classical liberals – ought to be immune to madnesses such as anti-Semitism. Yet the statement demanding that authors publicly renege their support for Israel is blatantly anti-Semitic, as it is plainly targeted at, and overwhelmingly intended to intimidate, writers who are Jewish.

Nor is anti-Semitism the only madness to grip the products of our academic institutions, and notably of the (increasingly misnamed) humanities departments. Rather, it was their calls that resonated most loudly in the persecution of Cardinal George Pell, the excesses of the #MeToo movement, the demonisation of “climate deniers”, the attempted suppression of dissenting opinion during the pandemic and the vilification of those who advocated a No vote in the voice referendum.

No one more astutely grasped the nature of that phenomenon than Theodore Adorno, the founder of Critical Theory, particularly after students he considered “red fascists” shut down his philosophy lectures for being “irrelevant” in 1968 and 1969.

Those students, he argued, exemplified the “neo-stupidity” of the “half educated” – they were instructed but not cultured, sufficiently learned to be arrogant but not sufficiently learned to understand the limits of their knowledge. They had, in other words, never understood how to be righteous without being self-righteous, to judge without being judgmental and to be moral without being merely moralistic.

Today’s situation is even worse than that. Too often, on issues that range from climate change to gender, and from Australian history to Indigenous policy, young people are taught answers, not questions. Little wonder then that the question mark, which is the hallmark of an open society, has vanished from their keyboard, if not from their vocabulary; and little wonder too that the spirit of tolerance, which is the spirit of liberty, has vanished with it.

There is, no doubt, more the government could and must do to protect those such as Nina Sanadze, who are bearing that trend’s awful consequences. In the end, however, Judge Learned Hand was right when he said “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women – when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; while it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it”. As we celebrate Australia Day, preserving liberty’s embattled spirit deserves to be the greatest priority of all.