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The Political Autonomy of Art

by Prof. Manos Tsangaris, Anh-Linh Ngo
President and Vice President of the Akademie der Künste

The relationship between art and politics is complex and fraught with tension. On the one hand, art is a critical medium that reflects social conditions. On the other hand, it is at risk of being instrumentalised by politics. In Europe, the way in which the resilience of democratic society can be weakened by political interference in culture is being demonstrated in countries such as Hungary, and also, increasingly, in Italy. These worrying developments should serve as a warning – attempts by politicians to restrict artistic freedom, such as the proposals currently under discussion in Germany, can lead to similarly negative consequences.

Art can only fulfil its social function, articulating grievances, addressing social injustice and initiating discourse around social change, if it is independent and speaks with its own voice. It fulfils this function by contradicting and provoking, by exploring and crossing boundaries, through empathy and critical reflection, as well as through seemingly escapist ramblings and work that does not appear to serve any particular purpose. Where such autonomy is lacking, there is a danger that politicians will appropriate art and culture for their own ends. The politicisation and instrumentalization of art can lead to control being exerted over artistic messages and forms of expression, in order to promote specific political narratives and to suppress the voices of opposition. Art thus becomes a tool of power and its ability to react critically to world is severely limited.

At the same time, we are seeing politics becoming increasingly characterised by symbolic gestures. Conflicts are reduced to cultural issues instead rather than being treated as questions of politics. The culturalization of politics obscures the need to take real political action. One current example of this is the conflict over how to deal with antisemitism and criticism of Israel’s policies. This also concerns the art world; the Middle East conflict is a major issue of our time and impacts many artists personally, especially those from Jewish and Arab communities. Following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, in which over 1,200 people were killed and hundreds kidnapped, and the subsequent harsh response from Israel, which Hamas had counted on provoking and which has so far claimed around 55,000 lives and left hundreds of thousands homeless, there have been worldwide expressions of solidarity for both sides. Meanwhile, antisemitic attitudes and crimes against Jewish people have increased, even in places that are usually bastions of open-mindedness and anti-discrimination.

It is a historical fact that antisemitism, as a form of false consciousness, exists across the entire political spectrum. Antisemitism is not an exclusively right-wing ideology; it is just as compatible with leftist, liberal, decolonial and progressive milieus. It is precisely this adaptability and contextual diversity that has made it so historically persistent and dangerous. Recognizing this danger and continually educating

one's own environment with self-criticism and responsibility is the task of every generation. However, it is also true that political criticism of the actions of the current Israeli government and its way of waging war does not automatically make those voicing criticism anti-Semites, especially when such criticism does not target Israel's right to exist but is rather part of democratic debate within Israeli society.

We must, however, acknowledge that in Germany within the solidarity expressed by parts of the left, cultural stakeholders and the Arab-Muslim diaspora with the Palestinian cause, and their recognition of the suffering of the Palestinian population, antisemitic arguments have also surfaced. Such Israel-related antisemitism must be addressed critically within these communities through education and awareness-raising, and through measures to counter antisemitism, racism and misanthropy. Cultural institutions bear a special responsibility in this regard. That said, it would be a mistake to make antisemitism a "wokeness" problem. Nor is it an imported issue, as the right-wing insinuates when it alternately blames the growing Arab diaspora, the woke left, Islam, or even the critical Jewish diaspora for the rise of antisemitism in Germany. The aim of these projections is to exonerate those making such claims; they fail to acknowledge that, according to representative surveys, a quarter of the German population still harbours antisemitic prejudices (see Stefan Kornelius, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 23 October 2019).

The far right is strategically exploiting the current conflict in its culture war. Following the antisemitism scandal at Documenta 15, the AfD tabled a motion in the Bundestag that has astonishing parallels with the current debate on tightening funding guidelines. The AfD attributes the antisemitic incidents at Documenta and within the Middle East conflict to "post-colonial ideology," which it claims fuels "resentment against 'whites'" (Deutscher Bundestag, document 20/2598, 06/07/2022). The party, which is classified as a secured extremist organisation by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany's domestic intelligence service, demanded that "with immediate effect, no further federal funding should be made available for research or cultural and educational projects that seek to affirmatively promote post-colonial ideology, in order to prevent further dissemination of antisemitic ideas in German cultural life" (ibid.).

Three years ago, the Bundestag rejected this motion. Nevertheless, the AfD has won the debate. All other parties and cultural administrations have since adopted similar arguments and attempted to regulate art and science, whose freedom is enshrined in the German constitution, through restrictive funding guidelines. Last year, the Bundestag were drafting a resolution on the protection of Jewish life in Germany. Meanwhile, provisions to counter antisemitism and discrimination were discussed on various levels. It sounds like a matter of course – who wouldn't be in favour of protecting Jewish life in Germany, and against antisemitism and discrimination? Yet, behind these initiatives lies an attempt to tie the funding of art, culture and scientific research to tests of political attitudes. Ironically, the seemingly obvious argument of not using taxpayers' money to fund anti-democrats comes from genuine anti-democrats, as the AfD quote shows.

This is the background against which the current debate on artistic freedom is taking place in Germany. The adoption of laws and clauses that can withstand legal scrutiny has stalled on the grounds that the freedom of art is guaranteed in Art. 5 para. 3 of the German Constitution without any restrictions (see Lisa Berins, Frankfurter Rundschau, 21/07/2024). As a result, politicians are resorting to the politics of symbolism. Instead of enacting legal provisions, the Bundestag voted on the aforementioned resolution, which, by its very nature, is not legally binding, and as a parliamentary statement not subject to legal scrutiny.

You may think that there is no need to worry since this is just symbolic politics and that the freedom of art is not truly at risk. But as artists, we know the power of symbols. It is no coincidence that symbols have always been a powerful instrument when it comes to politics. They have a deep impact on the collective consciousness, shaping the norms and values of a society. Symbolic gestures often operate subtly, but they have far-reaching effects on the social fabric. This also applies to legally non-binding parliamentary resolutions, such as the BDS resolution of 2019. According to the Bundestag Research Service, such resolutions have a significant political impact despite their lack of force in law (see Elaboration on the BDS resolution of the German Bundestag, document 19/10191, 21 December 2020). In the realm of cultural policy, the non-binding nature of the resolution leads to lack of legal clarity, and insecurity, which in turn can lead to abuse and manipulation.

The constitutional guarantee of artistic freedom, a benchmark of an open and democratic society, is being called into question and jeopardised here, through the back door. This freedom includes not only protection from state censorship, but also the ability to openly discuss artistic, social and political issues. Critical debate, including on politically sensitive and controversial topics, is an essential component of free art. Or, as Patrick Bahners puts it in his comments on the debate in the Süddeutsche Zeitung (13/08/2024), “Such questions of demarcation are by their very nature the essence of democratic debate, to which artists, intellectuals and scientists can contribute ideas that challenge the dominant routines of thought.”

In the context of a deliberative democracy, art provides space for critical reflection and debate that is often lacking in other areas. If political guidelines restrict artistic freedom, art loses its essential function. Instead of reacting freely and independently to developments in society, it becomes a tool of political propaganda. In the hands of anti-democratic forces, the restriction of art, no matter how well-intentioned, becomes a threat to democracy itself. It is up to all of us to defend the freedom of art and ensure that it remains a valuable asset in the future. This is the only way that art can continue to hold up a critical mirror to society and promote openness and democracy.

In the 21st German Bundestag, which was constituted on 25 March 2025, the AfD is the second strongest force. It is now important to secure the democracy-orientated institutions for the future.

The Akademie der Künste has gone through many diverse phases as an institution. It was founded in 1696 by the ruling Prussian elector to serve representative purposes. It underwent an important reform process in the 18th century. In 1933, the institution actively cooperated, conformed and fell into line with the National Socialists. After 1945, German successor academies were founded in East and West Berlin – a process of fusing both institutions into one followed in the 1990s.

When the institution was officially entrusted to the federal government, it was stipulated by law in 2005 (which went into effect in 2006) that it is autonomous.

“The Akademie der Künste … is tasked with promoting art … The Akademie der Künste expresses independent responsibility.”

This was written into the law for good reason.