

Calling the Sydney festival boycott 'censorship' is a disingenuous attempt by those in power to silence Palestinians



'That Palestinians are being forced to explain and restate the basis of the boycott call, only to be ignored and misrepresented is a form of censorship itself.'

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Those who attack cultural boycotts in the name of 'free speech' are conveniently missing when Palestinians are routinely bullied for speaking their truth

In early December 2021, Palestinians and Arabs representing a diversity of creative, activist and academic practice approached the board of Sydney festival after it was revealed the board had accepted \$20,000 funding from the Israeli embassy for the presentation of Sydney Dance Company's realisation of Decadance, a work created by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin of the Batsheva Dance Company of Tel Aviv. The amount gave the embassy "star partnership" status with Sydney Festival.

We made three requests: divest from the star partnership, end all relations with the State of Israel, and remove any Israeli government emblem from Sydney festival's promotional material.

In arguing our case for divestment, we said Arab and Palestinian communities would not participate in a festival that does business with a state that stands credibly accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to crimes defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. In 2021, Human Rights Watch found Israel is committing "crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution".

We made it clear artists and arts organisations – fundamental partners in any arts festival – felt betrayed by Sydney festival. Finally, we pointed out this partnership denied artists an environment of cultural safety, leaving artists, creatives and companies with no choice but to withdraw.

Our arguments were rejected by the board on the grounds Sydney festival is a “non-political organisation”. In response, Palestinians and a cross-section of artists, arts organisations and communities publicly called for a boycott of the Sydney festival, inspired and guided by the global Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, founded and led by Palestinian civil society.

The effusive response to the boycott call has been unprecedented, in fact historic. It is being cited as the most effective, creative and impactful campaign targeting complicit Israeli sponsorship of an international arts event in Australia, and indeed one of the most successful in the world.

The backlash to this artist-led cultural boycott has been predictable, indeed recycling arguments used in the 1980s against the boycott of apartheid South Africa.

One criticism in particular exposes how liberalism’s conceits of “free speech”, “marketplace of ideas”, “open debate” and “dialogue” is weaponised against Palestinians to shut down their right to resist and to deny them “permission to narrate” as renowned Palestinian-American professor Edward Said famously argued in 1984.

Freedom of expression it seems is only afforded to those in power and with power

According to New South Wales arts minister Ben Franklin, it is the boycott – not the actions of Sydney festival – which “shut down specific creative voices simply on account of their nationality”, acting as a “kind of censorship”.

In an opinion piece published in the Australian, federal arts minister Paul Fletcher described those involved in the boycott as Stalinist censors and Hamas’ “useful idiots”. Such contrived hysteria over the boycott “stultif[ying] and suppress[ing] artistic and creative excellence”, and laughable comparisons with “Stalinist Russia”, are amusingly desperate claims and demonstrate just how rattled Israel’s defenders are in the face of incontrovertible daily evidence of that state’s brutality.

The arguments are embarrassing and spurious. Organisers have repeatedly stated the cultural boycott aims at institutions not individuals, targeting complicity, not identity. There was never any attempt to shut down the actual production of Decadance. The target of the boycott call was Sydney festival as a cultural institution for its refusal to divest from its sponsorship and therefore its complicity with the State of Israel.

That Palestinians and their supporters are being forced to explain and restate the basis and terms of the boycott call, only to be ignored and misrepresented is a form of censorship itself. Whose voices are privileged: those who defend oppression or those resisting it?

Those arguing against the boycott claim boycotts “burn” rather than “build” bridges. At the first meeting with the board, artists made the crucial point bridges must be built on ethical and just foundations. A star partnership with the State of Israeli is one way to destroy these foundations and for this reason artists cannot, in good conscience, cross that bridge.

The board’s refusal to listen to artists is a form of silencing.

The weaponising of “censorship” against the boycott is hollow because the ministers conveniently ignore questions of power and privilege. The power dynamics between artists and the board of Sydney festival, between marginalised communities and the monocultural establishment, between individuals and institutions are key critical points of reflection here.

What makes these censorship allegations even more disingenuous is the fact that in the same breath as Palestinians and their allies are accused of being censorious, opposition arts spokesperson, Labor’s Walt Secord called for legislation to cut off funding to arts organisations that participate in a boycott of Israel. Freedom of expression it seems is only afforded to those in power and with power.

Those who attack cultural boycotts in the name of “free speech” are invariably missing in action when Palestinians are routinely censored, bullied and “cancelled” for daring to speak their truth. Certainly they remain silent and indifferent to the violent suppression of Palestinian arts and culture, on the raids, lawfare and intimidation of Palestinian artists and artistic and cultural institutions.

This is precisely why the boycott of Sydney festival has been called and indeed, why it has been so impactful and effective.

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