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The tyranny of being right

When moral certainty becomes an excuse to silence dissent, democracy loses something essential — the ability to disagree

The writer Michel Houellebecq has said many things that one might, with good reason, find repugnant. The French *enfant terrible* has been provoking controversy for decades with his views on religion, immigration and Islam. In an interview from 2022, he predicted attacks on mosques and cafés frequented by Muslims. He has also repeatedly made scathing remarks about Muslim immigration and crime. Now the French judicial authorities have launched a preliminary investigation against the author. The charge: aiding and abetting incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence. He even faces a prison sentence of up to one year.

One need not share Houellebecq's vision of the future to consider the proceedings absurd. For there is a fundamental difference between a warning about a possible escalation of violence and a call for violence. Someone who fears a civil war is by no means wishing for one to happen. This is precisely what Deniz Yücel, spokesperson for the writers' association PEN Berlin, pointed out: 'A warning against violence is not a call for violence.' The very fact that a writer is being prosecuted at all for such statements should give a liberal society pause for thought. Especially as Houellebecq represents a literary tradition that challenges societal developments to debate precisely through provocation and bleak visions of the future. Yet this is about more than the question of where the state is permitted to draw the boundaries of freedom of expression. Underlying this is a societal problem: we defend our own convictions with great determination, but are increasingly unwilling to tolerate differing views.

Questionable measures across the board

The Houellebecq case is not an isolated one. The European Union has imposed far-reaching sanctions on the Swiss columnist Jacques Baud and

the German journalist Hüseyin Doğru. The EU accuses them of spreading Russian propaganda and undermining European interests. Yet even those who consider Baud's analyses to be incorrect or one-sided must ask themselves why such statements should justify sanctions that threaten their livelihoods. In Doğru's case, the matter is no less baffling: according to the EU, he maintains links to Russian state propaganda. So far, however, it has failed to produce any publicly verifiable evidence that would provide a comprehensible justification for the sanctions against him. Posts on X in which he criticises the Chancellor for arms deliveries to Ukraine surely cannot, in all seriousness, justify such drastic measures. Both men's bank accounts have been frozen, and their ability to pursue paid work has been drastically curtailed. They are also subject to travel restrictions. And all this without any prior charge or court judgement. A thumbs-down from the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, is enough. Is this really the response a liberal democracy should come up with in reaction to potentially questionable political positions?

A look at the situation in the US shows that this problem transcends political divides. There, in July 2025, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Among other things, Washington accused her of acting against American and Israeli interests through her cooperation with the International Criminal Court. Human rights organisations criticised the move as an attack on the independence of international human rights work. The US philosopher Nancy Fraser, the social scientist Ghassan Hage and the professional footballer Anwar El Ghazi can also tell you a thing or two about the price that public solidarity with the Palestinians can exact.

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Of course, the cases differ considerably. Yet whether we consider such measures justified apparently also depends on who they affect. As long as it is political opponents, it is easy to overlook the consequences. We should ask ourselves, however, whether we would apply the same standards if our own convictions were at stake.

It is also the case that state sanctions are not always needed to deter people from expressing their opinions. Sometimes, the fear of the reaction of others is enough. Who wants to risk their job, jeopardise friendships or be pilloried on social media? Of course, freedom of expression includes the right to strongly disagree with others. No one is entitled to applause for their views. Yet there is a difference between

dissent and social ostracism. When people choose to remain silent out of fear of the consequences, this alters public discourse – even if their freedom of expression remains legally intact.

Research by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research shows just how widespread this feeling is. Most recently, only 46 per cent of Germans believed they could freely express their political views. In the early 1990s, the figure was still more than three-quarters. Of course, this does not mean that Germany is any less governed by the rule of law today than it was then. Article 5 clearly still applies. However, it would be a grave mistake to dismiss these figures as mere sentiment. For anyone who believes they can no longer express their opinion freely will, when in doubt, prefer to remain silent.

Where the irony lies

Even more revealing, however, is another finding from the same survey. Many people who fear for their own freedom of expression are surprisingly quick to restrict the freedom of others. For instance, 64 per cent of CDU/CSU supporters want to ban the statement 'Soldiers are murderers', compared with just 38 per cent of Green Party supporters. When it comes to the claim that 'homosexuality is an illness', however, 63 per cent of Green Party supporters are in favour of a ban, compared with 50 per cent of CDU/CSU supporters. It seems that our willingness to tolerate a statement depends to a large extent on the extent to which it contradicts our own moral and political convictions.

Therein lies a remarkable irony. We lament the restriction of our freedom of expression, yet at the same time we are prepared to silence others. Not necessarily out of malice, but often precisely out of moral conviction. We consider certain statements to be so wrong, hurtful or dangerous that we are no longer willing to tolerate their dissemination. Yet the Left-wing icon Rosa Luxemburg had already articulated the crucial idea: 'Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently.' Freedom of expression is simply not a seal of approval for particularly reasonable or decent views. It specifically protects the right to say things that others consider fundamentally wrong.

This does not mean that a society must tolerate every statement. Calls for violence, criminal incitement and specific threats have their limits. Organised disinformation campaigns by foreign states are quite different from the expression of opinion by an individual citizen. But precisely because these distinctions are important, we should not blur them by adopting an ever-broader definition of what is unspeakable. Not every lie is a criminal offence. Not every provocation is incitement. And not every

politically reprehensible view poses a danger that should warrant state intervention.

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However, the danger does not stem solely from state interference in freedom of expression. It also lies in the fact that our societies are increasingly losing the ability to engage in debate with one another. The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz speaks of 'tolerance of ambiguity': the ability to endure contradictions and uncertainties. Instead of engaging with other perspectives, we are increasingly avoiding them. Above all, we consume media that confirm our world view and prefer to maintain friendships within our own political circles. Lately, there has been much talk of 'communities' everywhere. But what remains of a shared society if everyone feels they belong only to their own community?

The various camps are drifting apart like ice floes. In doing so, we often regard people in the other camp as more radical and intolerant than they actually are. Just how wide this perception gap is, is demonstrated by a study by the organisation *More in Common*: Democrats and Republicans in the US estimated the proportion of extreme positions in the opposing camp at an average of 55 per cent. In reality, it stood at around 30 per cent. This misjudgement was particularly pronounced, of all people, amongst those who are highly politically engaged. Social media and insular information bubbles can further reinforce such distorted perceptions. The fact that hostility towards those with differing views is also prevalent in Germany is shown by the latest Polarisation Barometer from TU Dresden: amongst party supporters, those who back the AfD and the Greens view people with differing opinions most negatively.

Liberal societies require a certain capacity for dissent: the willingness not merely to tolerate other beliefs, but to engage with them. This does not mean abandoning one's own stance; it means recognising that even people who think fundamentally differently are part of the same society. Yet tolerance alone is not enough. Democracy thrives on people with different interests and beliefs debating with one another, reaching compromises and finding common solutions. Anyone who sees those who think differently as nothing more than opponents is making precisely that increasingly impossible.



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