

Feeling Responsible: Affective Polarization and the Sense of Implication in Academic Debates on Israel/Palestine.

Workshop, 10 October 2024, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Germany

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on behalf of the project *Discourses of Mass Violence in Comparative Perspective*
(www.lmu.de/discoursesofmassviolence)

The conflict between Hamas and Israel in 2023/24 that focuses on Gaza has elicited a large number of public statements by academics and campus protests, mostly declaring solidarity with one side of the conflict and condemning the respective other side for its excessive use of violence against civilians. These statements and protests have spurred discussions about academic activism and the responsibility of academics vis-à-vis policymaking that entrench the left/right and the Global South/North divide, but also run across these lines.

In often heated exchanges, the current Gaza-Israel conflict appears as intensifying debates about the societal role of academic research and teaching already ongoing over the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the ecological crisis, and the war between Russia and Ukraine since 2022. What stands out is an intense “affective polarization” (Günay 2024) not only of debates in politics, media, and society, but also of academic communities that are prone to undermine mainstays of academic work. *Context* seems to have become a “dirty word”, suggesting relativization and justification of violence against civilians, in arguments shaped by “selective indignation” (Üngör 2024, 4)—while historical comparisons abound. Legal, political, and historical concepts such as *genocide*, *terrorism*, *apartheid*, and *resistance* are used for moral polarization rather than analytical differentiation. Contrasting points of view are often portrayed as delusional and/or driven by (unconscious) dehumanizing ideology, and hence no legitimate points of discussion.

The workshop seeks to address affective polarization in academic debate because it forestalls any such analysis and exchange or thought.

We propose that reflection on the role of academic research and education in the face of the Gaza-Israel conflict, which has complicated “the moral confidence of Western policymakers” (Cooley 2024, 15, 18), requires disentangling two layers: a complex conflict involving a multitude of actors from the sense of proximity to the conflict that springs from its seminal role in global identities. This approach is based in the hypothesis that affective polarization is not primarily based on opposing ideologies, but on divergent “identity conceptions” (Günay 2024, 5; Iyengar et al. 2019, 130). A concept particularly suited to approach this issue is the feeling of implication, i.e. the link between “responsibility and affect” (Rothberg 2024, 266). Feeling implicated in, and hence responsible for stopping wrongdoing can inspire “resistance”, “love and solidarity” (Rothberg 2024, 267). Yet, the current Gaza-Israel conflict demonstrates that it can also give rise to polemics, simplification, and enmity.

The sense of being implicated in the object of research is, per se, neither new nor problematic: the traditional distinction between “involved” actors and academics as “impartial” observers has long been criticised as far from impartial but aligning with

existent power structures (Bevernage/Lorenz 2013, 10). Research on war and mass violence can be expected to be driven by “motivated reasoning” (Könneker 2020, 428) as violence against civilians should not happen. However, academic polarization over the current Gaza-Israel conflict points out a complication in the “emotional logic” that “to witness is to participate” (Flatley 2023, 386) and calls for public intervention to curb the sense of complicity with violence: activism arising from the sense of refusing to be implicated in mass violence against Palestinian civilians, and hence being forced to speaking out, clashes with self-concepts based on a sense of responsibility towards Israel originating in an irrefutable implication in the Holocaust, particularly in Germany and (even if differently structured) in the US. Since the (moral) identity of both of these senses of implication is at stake, differentiation or compromise appear impossible—which also entails a deadlock for thinking about a resolution of the current Gaza-Israel conflict.

Against this background, affective polarizations in the academia over the current Gaza-Israel conflict can be understood as a hotspot of the contested re-negotiation of the cultural memory of mass violence, particularly the Holocaust in relation to global instances of violence. This negotiation is vital to forming “cultural identity”, which requires “conscious participation in or recognition of (*Bekanntnis zu*) a specific culture” (Assmann 2011, 115/2012 [1992], 134). Concerned with drawing identificatory consequences from violent pasts, this process often overlaps with the analysis of current conflicts (between Gaza and Israel, but also Russia and Ukraine), to which these consequences are applied. The overlap becomes particularly apparent in discourse traits that assimilate heated debates over Israel/Palestine to war discourse: the reduction of the conflict to two collectives, “an insistence on declaring allegiance exclusively to one side” — which implies a recognition of a specific identificatory memory culture—, and a “denial of explanation” of this “confession” (Pfeifer/Weipert-Fenner 2023, π4). Such explanation cannot easily be given because it would mean scrutinizing moral axioms of a group identity for their possible shortcomings.

The workshop seeks to move beyond rightful calls for a less emotionalized rhetoric so as to address:

- how the two layers of debates over Israel/Palestine can be differentiated,
- how this differentiation can be mirrored in academic as well as public discussion about conflict resolution,
- how lessons from other global instances of contested cultural memories of war and mass violence could help to improve academic discussion over the current Gaza-Israel conflict and its identificatory dimension,
- how the understanding of academic research and teaching might need to evolve over the current affective polarization,
- how a productive place for outrage and the sense of implication can be found in the academia.

The workshop will follow the Chatham **House Rule** (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>), which means: it will not be open to the general public, the agenda shall not be published by organizers or participants, and while participants are free to refer to topics and discussions, neither participants nor their affiliations shall be disclosed.

Only those who **circulate papers** (8–12 pages) ahead of the workshop will be able to give a talk at the workshop. We hope that all participants will read the papers in advance.

We aim to cover travel and accommodation **costs** for all participants.

We aim at the following **timeline**:

07 July 2024: deadline for abstracts
 15 July 2024: selection decision communicated
 15 September 2024: deadline for paper drafts
 10 October 2024: workshop at LMU Munich

Please send 250-word abstracts and a short bio to juliane.prade-weiss@lmu.de by 07 July 2024.

- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge U P.
- (2013 [1992]). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Beck.
- Bevernage, B., & Lorenz, C. (2013). *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Cooley, A. (2024). The Uprisings of Gaza: How Geopolitical Crises Have Reshaped Academic Communities from Tahrir to Kyiv. *Political Science Quarterly*, Advance access publication 28 February 2024: 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqae006>
- Flatley, J. (2023). On Implicatedness as a Political Feeling. *Parallax* 23.3: 386–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2024.2302663>
- Günay, C. (2024). The Gaza War: Affective Polarization and the Future of Democracy. *Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik — OIIP Trend Report* 8. <https://www.oiip.ac.at/publikation/the-gaza-war-affective-polarization-and-the-future-of-democracy/> (accessed 20 May 2024)
- Iyengar, S., & al. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annu. Rev. Political Sci.* 22:129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Könneker, C. (2020). Wissenschaftskommunikation und Social Media: Neue Akteure, Polarisierung und Vertrauen. In M. Jungert, & al. (eds.), *Wissenschaftsreflexion: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven zwischen Philosophie und Praxis*, pp. 419–441. Brill
- Pfeifer, H., & Weipert-Fenner, I. (2023). Israel—Gaza: A German War Discourse. <https://blog.prif.org/2023/12/07/israel-gaza-a-german-war-discourse/> (accessed 20 May 2024)
- Rothberg, M. (2023). Feeling Implicated: An Introduction. *Parallax* 29:3, 265–281. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2024.2302663>
- Üngör, U. Ü. (2024). Screaming, Silence, and Mass Violence in Israel/Palestine. *Journal of Genocide Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2309709>