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Academia's Responsibility in a Democratic Society Facing Existential Problems

As a scholar of peace and conflict studies in Germany, I belong to a research field that has traditionally had a normative orientation toward peace and ties to the peace movement. But my field has also repeatedly reflected on whether scholars conduct research *for* peace or *about* peace (Bonacker 2011). In this sense, the relation to activism is itself a core question of peace and conflict studies and has been answered differently by individual colleagues. While peace and conflict studies has witnessed a "professionalisation", pluralisation and differentiation, the critical turn in security studies has led to a rapprochement of these two fields in the eyes of some (Daase, Deitelhoff, and Geis 2024). Others, however, insist on a distinctiveness of genuine peace research which follows certain guiding principles: "First, [it] serves peace primarily, if not exclusively, rather than, for instance, social revolutions or national supremacy; second, [it] is explicitly and directly oriented toward peace – that is, without taking detours through war (its preparation, conduct, or support) […]; and third, [it] makes a reliable and lasting contribution to peace […]" (Jaberg 2024, 111, my translation).

The activism allegation as political assault and collegial suspicion

Against the backdrop of pervasive political discourses on *Zeitenwende* (since 2022) and *Staatsräson* (since 2023) in Germany, these questions have gained new relevance for peace and conflict researchers. That they are discussed as a question of activism rather than a reiteration of a classical question of the field is itself indicative of the character of the debate: The gloves are off. What is addressed by the allegation of activism is indeed not the weight of normative considerations in a given piece of research or how political it is – whether in an explicit, hidden, or reflected way – and

what that means for the scope and validity of its findings. Rather, calling research "activist" fundamentally questions its epistemic value and scientific character as well as the author's motives: Do they try to sell ideology as science? The allegation is: This is not academic knowledge-production, but a misuse of the resources that come with epistemic authority and institutional privilege. The suspicion goes further: This person does not actually try to understand or critique existing conditions, nor do they search for truth. Rather, they aim at political manipulation through fabricated findings cloaked as scientific knowledge.[1]

Such forms of argumentation ring the bells of conspiracy theories and far right defamations of systems of knowledge production, be it journalism or academia, upon which democracy as a division of labour depends. But they are no longer employed only by the outspoken enemies of democracy. Rather, the activism allegation is now used by a broader political spectrum and has also 'poisoned' collegial interactions among scholars. Moreover, it is at the basis of intra-academic de-solidarisation with entire research fields, be it for political opportunity or because of a deeply-held conviction that some fields are *per se* somewhat less academic, such as gender studies (for a long time, see Fittkau 2015) and post- and decolonial studies. The latter has recently faced campaigns marking the field as dangerous and as an "attack on the West" (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2025). The closeness to the German far right AfD's "government programme" proposed for the upcoming elections in Saxony Anhalt is difficult to overlook (Pfeifer and Binder 2026).

Academia as part of a society facing existential problems

The academic community does not face the activism allegation as a whole and not only from the outside. Rather, some researchers, fields, and traditions are the typical recipients of this allegation, which has been normalised in the academic debate culture (see, for example, Nassehi and Saake 2026). This is worrisome but also points to a larger phenomenon: Academia is part of a society that is facing "existential

problems" (Scheffer 2021) or problems that question the reproduction of this society. And it has, therefore, become a site of politicisation of some of the most pressing issues of our times: climate catastrophe and mass extinction, fascisation and autocratisation, poverty and starvation, the return of inter-state war (as well to Europe) and civilian targeting as a means of warfare, including genocide (most visibly in Gaza). This list could continue but I limit myself to those issues that are inescapably present to us living in Germany at this moment in history – and, thus, to us as academics.

These existential problems and the processes of social change they entail are of a quality and magnitude that do not allow us to retreat to a position of "not my concern". They are totalising in that they draw society as a whole into their vortex. This is the case irrespective of whether they are politically addressed or remain relatively untreated. It is actually an indicator of these very problems that researchers also become activists. Existential problems have a tendency to erode the boundaries amongst the researcher and those researched, amongst different systems and spheres of society.

Climate catastrophe will either hit us, as humans and societies across globe, relatively unmitigated and unprepared in the form of devastation and death, or we will have to go through great societal and economic transformations in an effort to prevent what is still preventable and to adapt to what is irreversible damage. Fascisation will either flourish without resistance and change our societies to the unrecognisable (or all too well recognisable), or we will have to mobilise resources from all sectors of society against it. Social inequality may rise to a degree that makes impoverishment a new normality and, as such, will undermine the very basis of a democratic culture.

Zeitenwende investments in defence and a large-scale militarisation are already transforming public spending and affect the everyday in many public and workplaces. But even without these efforts, the Russian aggression has already

helped deepen preexisting political rifts in society. Some Germans are denying the concrete danger that this country constitutes for its neighbours in spite of its hybrid warfare measures taking effect (recently in the form of a drone attack at Leipzig airport) and its brutal war and crimes having already killed thousands of Ukrainians and even more Russians. This war has also shattered imperfect yet existing institutions of cooperation and the hope for great power politics to be overcome by international law.

These hopes were put to grave by Israel's genocide in Gaza and the subsequent reactions by powerful third states. All of them condemned Hamas' terrorist attacks and the crimes it committed. None has used its power to stop the genocide. Some, namely the US and Germany, have even found military, political, diplomatic and economic ways of supporting the *génocidaires* (Pfeifer 2026a). The violence has culminated in further wars of aggression by Israel and the US against Iran, as well as large scale violence and numerous war crimes against civilians in Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. These wars and crimes have undermined international law. But they have also transformed German society into a society that has supported the third genocide after the one against the Herero and Nama and the Holocaust. While no extra-legal *Staatsräson* and constitutive denial can change this, they have had their effect in the form of repressive and authoritarian interference (Celikates 2026) – especially against migrant communities and not least in academic institutions. Policies of *Staatsräson* have not only violated norms of international law but also attacked academic freedom in Germany and the domestic legal order (Pfeifer and Goldmann 2025; Ambos 2026; Möllers, Lenz, and Weinberg 2026; Samour, Joyce, and Pahuja 2025).

Activism in times of politicised academic practice and genocide

For Germany, with regard to the Gaza genocide and the Israel/Palestine conflict, the politicisation of academic practice has been unprecedented (Pfeifer and Williams

2026). In a forum of the *ZeFKo Studies in Peace and Conflict* in 2026, several contributing scholars have reflected on the activist allegation in this context. One colleague highlights the necessity to simultaneously "produce rigorous scientific contributions and to gain public recognition" (Karadağ 2026) for scholars in the field, facing restrictions of their academic work. Here, activism appears as necessary condition for the continuation of academic work on Israel/Palestine. Another one asserts that "[s]cholarship is always political, either by aligning implicitly with the status quo or by challenging it". She describes calls for neutrality addressed to researchers on Israel/Palestine as a "technology of depoliticization" (Wahba 2026) that normalises some political positions, while repressing others. And finally, a third colleague reminds us that, except in the case of Palestine, scholars are even expected to show that their research has relevance and impact and regularly do so through various transfer and consulting activities. These activities are, however, not called activism and "usually not considered the problem, but one of the functions of Peace and Conflict Studies", he writes. The activism allegation, then, is a "derogatory gesture" to delegitimise relevance and impact where they become uncomfortable (Anderl 2026).

These authors present political practice by academics or what is called "activism" as a necessary condition to continue the specific academic work on Israel/Palestine (Karadağ 2026), as an ethical obligation (Wahba 2026), or as regular part of the expectations addressed to academics – by funders, by university leaderships, by politicians – in a neoliberal system of academia (Anderl 2026). Against the backdrop of the existential problems described above, one could even deepen these claims on academia-in-society. I will do so in three steps.

Toward as stubborn scholarly practice and solidary academic community

1. *Conditions of the possibility of academic practice need to be generally defended*

The problems we face as society today are such that they not only endanger academic work in specific fields and on particular problems but rather the possibility of academic practice as such. Many do not have the privilege to choose whether or not they want to become activists because they are under direct attack. Yet those who have so far considered themselves to be in the distanced position of pure academics are mistaken. Where violence systematically attacks civilians and destroys whole academic systems, as happened in Gaza, scholarly work becomes impossible. This demands *generalised* solidarity on the part of colleagues elsewhere in the world (Pfeifer 2025). Similarly, political attempts at dismantling fields of research or entire disciplines are not only of concern to those who work in those areas. An attack on their academic freedom must be read as an attack on academic freedom as a whole and therefore be opposed as a *matter of principle*. Where politicians try to forbid institutions of higher education to decide for a *Zivilklausel*, a legally binding "self-commitment to civilian purposes and peaceful objectives in research, study, and teaching" (Bornmüller 2023, 9, my translation), this must be reproached as an infringement on institutional autonomy *as such*.

2. *Society can reasonably expect that academia does its part in addressing existential problems*

Existential problems are of a totalising quality in that they affect us all and require all resources and capacities available in a society to be treated. In that sense, society can reasonably expect academia to do its part in addressing them – that is, to produce reliable knowledge *and* to communicate research results to a broader public, including recommendations for political action. This is the contribution that academia must make to democratic processes capable of doing justice to the problem at hand. Asking academics to embrace a neutral position toward existential problems is cynical. But it is also against the spirit of the German constitution specifically, and the democratic, rules-based order of societies more generally. As they endanger society as a whole, researchers can be expected to work *against* the

climate catastrophe, war, mass violence, fascism, poverty.[2] A position of distance to these problems is itself analytically flawed for, as argued above, they *will* undermine the researchers' academic work *as well*. Academia is part of a society that enables *and* requires its work. From this derives a systemic academic responsibility that has to replace the – individually risky – activism of the few.

3. *Insisting on the distinctiveness of the academic mode*

In order to fulfil its function for democracy – providing the epistemic foundation for political action and critically analysing prevailing conditions – academia must insist on the existence and protection of a specifically *academic* practice that draws its value from being distinct from other practices. The liberal principle of academic freedom, as also enshrined in the German constitution, protects individuals and institutions primarily against interference by the state. But academic practice requires more than formal freedom: It depends on a scientific ethos which "guarantee[s] the normative basis that allows for our scientific discussion, the tough argumentative dispute, the heated argument about the correct view, thesis, and theory, to flourish" (Özmen 2024, 383). The normative principles that guide academic practices of seeking truth (which includes the possibility that there is no truth), regularly revisiting and revising what is counted as known, and producing reliable knowledge make them distinct from the political logic. Academics should resist the temptation to conflate their academic with their political practice. But they should seek to maximise the power of scholarship as a resource for the necessary struggles of our times.

Doing this is objectively difficult. How to protect the academic mode while the forces of existential problems pull toward de-differentiation? How to combine the necessary academic openness with an equally necessary political resolve? How can academia fulfil its function in society while insisting that it has value in and of itself? How to write a contribution in a way that makes it recognisable as academic for

others, how to preserve the scientific ethos even when writing politically as I do in this piece? How can we take the time that academic work requires, how can we avoid getting distracted from the indispensable search for the truth about existential problems – while the world is burning? Surely recognising the difficulty and necessity of addressing these questions is a better starting point for (collegial) interaction than making allegations of activism and thereby implicitly denying that we are facing existential problems in the first place.

Footnotes

1 To be sure, we are simultaneously witnessing a growth of pseudo-science, with an increasing number of publications emerging from the far right that has started to build parallel institutions alongside existing academic structures in various societies around the globe (Pfeifer 2026b; Kirsch 2026). This makes it all the more important to uphold a firm understanding of, and a clear commitment to, the standards of academic work. According to these standards, pseudo-science is readily recognisable.

2 The concrete implications of this are, of course, a matter of academic and political struggle. But where academics limit themselves to analysing existential problems without taking a stance against them, they enter more than just relativist denial.

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