Hannah
Alisha M.B. Heinemann

Universities as (un)political Spaces

The only true force against the principle of Auschwitz would be autonomy, if I may use the Kantian expression; the power of reflection, of self-determination, of non-participation (Adorno, 2012, p. 128, transl. by authors (tba)).

Where we stand

As we write this text, fascisation and actual fascism are once again on the rise worldwide (Walia, 2021). We, we are a student of cultural anthropology and a professor of educational science at a German university. As we discuss and write this text, far-right parties are being elected by a growing number of voters in democratic elections in Germany, and we are worried, even scared. As women of color, we know the racist structures in Germany from our own experience, and as Germans – being born and brought up within the borders of this nation – we have been taught to take responsibility for what happened during the Nazi regime so that it will never happen again. Therefore, we would actually expect masses protesting in the streets, resistance in the institutions, masses that resist and do not participate, as Theodor Adorno demands in the opening quote of this text. Unfortunately, this has not been the case so far. On the contrary. Especially within academia, the place where controversial scholarly discussions should take center stage, critical voices are silenced or are too intimidated to speak out.

Under the pretext of the university being a 'neutral' or 'unpolitical' space, the freedom of (academic) speech is attacked on various levels. One of the most obvious examples that illustrates this very well, is the way critical voices are treated in the context of the enduring struggles in Palestine/Israel. We would like to elaborate on this point, but breaking the silence means, of course, to operate in a discursive minefield. Therefore, we would like to outline four of our core beliefs so that readers will know from the beginning where we are coming from. These beliefs are: First:

Jewish people are not be conflated with the state of Israel. Second: In line with Michael Rothberg's (2012) idea of multi-directional memory, we believe that condemning and commemorating human rights violations should never put specific cases in competition with each other, so that no horror will be downplayed and no human life considered less worthy of mourning. Third: We recognize international law and the international Court of Justice as its operating arm as the currently most balanced tools in the pursuit of international justice. Fourth: Antisemitism, Anti-Muslim-Racism and all forms of racism and discrimination are violent ideologies of inequality and as such must be condemned without reservation.

Student protests

Now that we have established this, we want to continue to focus our attention on the voices that are actually taking to the streets in order to take a clear stand. We see that in many parts of the world it is students who, in solidarity with the struggles of indigenous and oppressed minorities have the courage to stand up to repressive, authoritarian regimes. Among some of the most recent examples are the students in Iran and Kurdistan, who have repeatedly taken to the streets at great personal risk under the slogan Jin, Jhihan Azadi (Women, Life, Freedom) to fight against an oppressive patriarchal regime (Hosseini Goddrich, 2023), the students in India, demonstrating against Modi's Hindu nationalist regime, that suppresses the rights of Adivasi, Dalit and Muslim fellow citizens (Kumar, 2024, 2025), and the students in Serbia also taking to the streets to fight against their corrupt authoritarian regime and for the basic implementation of the rule of law (Giebel, 2025). In line with these recent examples are the anti-war protests around the world, where students and academics are calling for an end to the genocide in Gaza, and a lasting, just solution for the unbearable situation that the Palestinian people have endured for more than 80 years.

In Germany, too, students make up a significant proportion of the protests, taking the issue to the streets and campuses, standing in solidarity with the plight of the

civilian population, which they follow closely on social and in international media (since German media coverage is heavily biased). They watch the stories of many journalists and listen to doctors and humanitarian workers describing the horrors they experience every day. They know about the arrest warrants issued by the International Court of Justice against Benjamin Netanjahu and Yoav Gallant. They read that Amnesty International (2024), one of the largest and most respected human rights NGOs in the world, concludes in its latest report, that "there is sufficient evidence to believe that Israel's conduct in Gaza following 7 October 2023 amounts to genocide" (p. 13). At the same time, they learn that the German government continues to send arms to support the ongoing war in Gaza and listen to politicians who talk about a 'Staatsräson' that obliges them to stand unwaveringly behind the hard right Israeli government. What the demonstrators want is an end to the genocide and a just resolution of the ongoing occupation according to international law. But so far, it is only the protests themselves which have forcibly been and are still being brought to an end, while the participants and all those who verbally support them are demonized as supporting terror, as antisemitic and as 'perpetrators'. Forces that come in the form of police violence are the most obvious and visible ones. They produce bodies that are restricted in their movements, trapped and injured. But institutional forms of violence, such as the denial of assembly rooms, the banning of events and seminars, and signing resolutions that restrict academic freedom, are exactly that – forms of violence. Those who organize spaces within academia to promote dialogue about the situation in Gaza, those who want to use the campus as a space to show that they care about what is happening to civilians in Palestine face restrictions in most of the German universities.

We see direct consequences not only affecting protesting students from all backgrounds, including Jewish students, but -especially perfidious- in particular Jewish scholars, too: Nancy Fraser, a Jewish-American scholar, was disinvited for a teaching position in Cologne because of signing a pro-Palestinian letter (Connolly, 2024). Masha Gessen, a Jewish Russian-American writer, was denied the Hanna-

Arendt-Prize for political thinking in the city hall of Bremen and instead received it in a small crowded event room where only 50 people could enter – this because she compared the situation in Gaza with a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany (Connolly, 2023). Omri Boehm, a German-Israeli philosopher, who was to give a speech at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora, was disinvited because he demanded that the Nakba be officially recognized and remembered in Israel (Hesse, 2025). Examples for incidents with non-jewish scholars were Francesca Albanese, UN special rapporteur for the Palestinian territories, who was denied a place to speak in two German universities (Munich and Berlin) (Knight, 2025) and a scientific congress about Gaza in Frankfurt which got its rooms denied by the university only a few days before its set date (Kirlidokme, 2025). These are just some of the most public incidents of the silencing of critical voices. There were more and there are more to come.

The (un)political university and colonial entanglements

When those who want to keep the universities 'free from dissent' are asked: Why? – The answers they give are multifaceted. But most of them have a central message: "As universities, we don't have a political mandate, we must act 'neutrally'", – but what does this actually mean? Is there such a thing as a 'neutral' ground on which a university can stand on to avoid being political? When we follow post- and decolonial scholars and their analytical work on epistemic violence (Moradi, 2025; Spivak, 1994), the claim to neutrality in contexts of oppression can be seen as part of a long historical continuity of using knowledge to maintain power and a generally problematic approach of educational and research institutions to knowledge and knowledge production. Many sciences and methodologies were developed during the colonial period, with *white* researchers from Western universities going into 'new' societies and communities and studying them, making the 'other' the subject of their research (Madison, 2012). With this approach to other cultures and ways of

knowing and through racist beliefs in the superiority of the *white* man, specific ideas of knowledge and ways of knowing were established. In it, only the *white* man was able to meet the standards of science by being objective and neutral, while other societies and their diverse approaches to knowledge, were diminished and stigmatized as inherently subjective and situated (Smith, 2017). The experiences of the "other" were analyzed and interpreted through the eyes of the white researcher, establishing a positivist stance to ensure the sovereignty of the legitimacy of knowledge. The 'Western' idea of knowledge also involved the separation of the mind from the body, claiming universality to its findings outside of the bodies that produced them and disregarding the influence of their contexts, times and epistemologies (Darder, 2009; hooks, 1994). To this day many indigenous communities around the world are struggling to decolonize educational institutions and the ideas of what is considered as science, for the acknowledgment of the positionality and the way knowledge and knowledge production is always situated within a context, defining its boundaries, but also valuing the individual who creates the knowledge and the many forms of knowing that are individual to everyone's experiences and resources (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Recognizing that all knowledge, all ideas and concepts are always situated in a specific context, means that these ideas are also always heavily defined by existing power structures and serve the purpose of maintaining the status quo. To intervene in the question of what constitutes 'legitimate' and 'neutral' knowledge is always to disrupt the status quo. Thus, the idea of neutrality can be understood as a colonial continuity: it claims the existence of an 'objective' and 'neutral ground', ignoring how this ground is still defined by power structures and situated knowledge. Any claim outside of this defined 'neutrality' becomes 'political'. Thus, it is possible to claim 'neutrality' when expressing empathy with the victims of October 7. At the same time, it is marked as 'political' to express empathy with the victims of Israel's war in Gaza.

For us, one of the core questions arising from this dynamic is the role of the university' in society. What kind of an institution do we want to study, research and

teach in? What are its responsibilities and duties in challenging or reinforcing the political establishment and the status quo? Do we want our universities to take a stand against oppression and the crackdowns on free speech? Or do we want them to be complicit, by claiming neutrality, and by abandoning one of their core concepts: autonomy.

Taking the risk and facing our fears

If the university continues to imagine itself as neutral, it will continue to secure the hegemonic powers even if they are no longer in line with democratic values. We can see the far-reaching results of this when we look at the USA, where the massive violent crackdown on camps and protests on campus set the stage for Trump's government to now break several laws to further criminalize the activists. But if the university is in fact a space where democratic rights and values are taught and protected, it is also a space of political responsibility, and that means it must act. It must take risks, speak truth, open itself for controversial discourses, for multiple memories and experiences, and confront injustice.

To do this, we need to make the human being whole again, to reunite mind, body and spirit, to put knowledge back in the body and into positionality and claim our subjectivity and our political position as our strength. Because our positionality is not what makes our ideas and thoughts less valuable, but it is what we can give to the world. And what we can give the world is not only to fight the colonial continuities of ideas and ways of knowing, but to stand up for the values we believe in. Reuniting body and mind also means rediscovering our agency, doing what we can for our fellow human beings, despite criminalization. Even though the fight against 'neutrality' can be frightening, disturbing, shocking, sad – knowing that you are fighting for something that is bigger than yourself has always been and will always be the fuel for movements that can make the world into a better place.

A PS from the student author:

Can I be honest? It's so scary. It's scary to sit in a camp, about to be arrested for my values and not knowing what the consequences will be. It's scary to see how the public discourse justifies every step of this process with no perspective to where it leads. It's scary to be left alone as a student, knowing that barley to no professor or researcher is willing to take the risks of defending you. It's even scarier to see how little the public cares, not just for us, not just for the students beaten in Berlin (Casey, 2024) or taken hostage in Munich (Jarrah & Gremminger, 2025), but about the events on the ground. Because, and this is always important to remember: it's not about us. It's about the people who are being silenced, dehumanized, exploited and exterminated, not just in Gaza, but all over the world. And the only way to achieve any effective change is to take the comparatively small risks in front of us. There will be no better world if we don't fight for it. If we stay silent.

We have agency. No matter in what position. And we have to choose: complicit silence or embracing our responsibility.

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