Multi-Perspectivity & Ethical Representation in the Context of Gaza & October 7: Addressing the Semantic Void

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The language that researchers use to describe the increasingly violent reality in Gaza has become a contested space. Analytical terms like "genocide," "self-defense," "terrorism," and "resistance," while not inherently normative, have become tests of political loyalty. This reflects a broader struggle over the dominant narrative, particularly evident in Germany, where semantic disputes have hindered scholars' ability to contribute meaningful analysis to public debates. Amid shrinking spaces for critical inquiry, we highlight the responsibility of scholars to counteract the expanding semantic void surrounding the Gaza war and the events of October 7 by advocating for an ethical representation of violence that honors the experiences of those affected. This responsibility rests on two foundations: 1) academic integrity, which requires naming, explaining, and contextualizing violent phenomena independent of political agendas, and 2) an ethical commitment to convey the lifeworld of research partners in terms of the meanings they attribute to it, without applying linguistic filters that distort these meanings.

Scholars have long criticized the discursive modes of exclusion and appropriation inherent in scientific endeavors aimed at generating knowledge about the so-called Global South. These critiques – most prominently advanced by feminist and postcolonial researchers – focus on the codification of particular analytic categories that, when reproduced in scholarly writings, are reified as natural and commonsense. They argue that the belief in the neutrality of scholarship and the language used to convey its findings are sustained by the hegemonic structuring of the academic field as a patriarchal, white, and Western domain, which allows those within it to overlook the partiality of their perspectives. Lisa Anderson has rightly questioned the implicit assumption that we all mean and aspire to the same things when we talk about abstract concepts such as *freedom* or *democracy*. She specifically criticizes the role of Western understandings of these notions as

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implicit models for the rest of the world, which effectively obscure the global diversity of experiences: "This conviction privileges the experience of a relatively small number of relatively recent political experiments, relegating the vast bulk of human experience to a residual category."[1]

This critique remains timely and aptly describes the current "peculiar wrangling over terminology" in the context of the Gaza war, specifically as it regards the dynamics of violence.[2] Researching and reporting on these dynamics presents immense challenges. As with all violent conflicts, these challenges arise from the war's volatility and the scarcity of verifiable information. However, the Gaza war also presents a unique semantic challenge. Discussions are fragmented and contentious, hindered by the absence of a shared semantic framework that fosters constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. In the past, many scholars responded to this *semantic void* with *avoidance* of any discussions of Israeli and Palestinian politics, fearing misinterpretation, backlash, or an inability to engage in good faith. This avoidance has perpetuated ignorance, neglect, and a lack of understanding of an untenably violent situation. The massacres of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent brutal war on Gaza have exposed the limitations of this strategy. But instead of fostering a more inclusive and empathetic debate, these events have deepened divisions, making meaningful conversations even more difficult. This issue is particularly pronounced in Germany. In this essay, based on eighteen months of field research, we argue that the targeting, defamation, and withdrawal of researchers, in the context of a weaponized German *Staatsräson* (reason of state), has left a gap in public discourse, depriving debates on the Gaza war of depth and perspective.[3] German-Israeli playwright Sivan Ben Yishai summarized the problem in April 2024:

> It is a consequence of this gap that German society is moving further and further away from a critical, multi-perspective discussion about the war. Instead of coming together and discussing differences, we are retreating more and more into our peer groups and clinging to what we thought and believed from the beginning.[4]

As a result, German public debate has largely shifted from discussing the realities in Palestine and Israel to engaging in heated arguments over the appropriate language to describe these events. In this secondary "conflict over the conflict," the use of specific terminology, even for analytical purposes, is misrepresented and misconstrued as a means to demarcate bodies and delineate political camps.[5] The ethical act of naming violence and ensuring an accurate representation of violent experiences – using the language of those affected – has become nearly impossible.

Using the contentious public debate in Germany as a vantage point, we advocate for a critical approach to knowledge generation about the Gaza war, emphasizing mindfulness in terminology and highlighting that theorizing is fundamentally about openness to new perspectives and ideas. We argue that scholars of conflict and violence have a responsibility to oppose a restriction of the language to

legitimately describe and explain the unspeakable suffering and violations they witness. This duty stems from: 1) a professional commitment to protect academic integrity by naming, describing, and contextualizing violent phenomena and their features and origins, free from political considerations, independent of who might benefit; and 2) an ethical commitment to convey the lifeworld – that is, the subjective realities and lived experiences – of research partners in terms of the meaning they attribute to them, without applying linguistic filters that reframe, rephrase, distort, or correct these meanings.[6]

While this dual responsibility may also apply to the use of analytical terminology in describing other sociopolitical phenomena (for example, democracy, as Anderson illustrates), it is particularly crucial when addressing violent conflict.[7] Describing violence is uniquely challenging and consequential. Representations that fail to capture the experiences of those affected by violence risk not only exacerbating traumatic experiences but also losing their impact on audiences. Violence can only resonate with audiences if it is conveyed in a language that makes the affected subjects recognizable and grievable. The way violence is described ultimately determines which lives are seen as recognizable and which are not, potentially reinforcing deep-rooted inequalities.[8] Therefore, responsible and ethical narration of violence dynamics requires clarity in the process of theorizing and narrating, reflection on what is perceived and overlooked, and an articulation of these partialities – both of the subjects whose lifeworlds are conveyed and of the positionality of the researchers themselves.

Contestation over language and rhetoric has long been central to intellectual discussions on Israel and Palestine. Edward Said, in particular, highlighted this dimension of the conflict in his work. His analysis of a 1982 interview between journalist Barbara Walters and PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) chairman Yasser Arafat illustrates how the lack of a common language has pervaded commentary on Palestinian politics. Walters left little room for political controversy, as she ignored the biographical experience of her counterpart and the multi-perspectivity of the conflict. Instead, she reduced the Palestinian situation to questions of destiny, detached from the subjective experiences of Palestinians. Said noted that Walters did so unconsciously, as she "did not know – and, more importantly, there was no rhetoric for her to use easily even if she did know."[9]

Said's observation, though four decades old, remains relevant today. October 7 and the Gaza war show that empirical reality does not speak for itself but instead requires a socially accepted narrative with a constructed beginning and end that validates facts and embeds them in broader social discourse. Was October 7 a breaking of the siege that isolated Gaza from the world, a "prison break," or was it a terrorist attack on Israeli civilians, the largest mass killing of Jews since the Shoah? Are the civilian deaths in Gaza indicative of a "genocide," or merely col-

lateral damage in the context of Israeli "self-defense"?[10] These antagonistic framings, along with many others, situate the same acts of violence in vastly different historical and moral relations. Yet productive engagement with the roots of these differences and how they condition not only interpretations of violence but also political responses to it continues to be overshadowed by concerns about questions "not of policy, but of destiny."[11]

Even amidst brutal warfare and a humanmade humanitarian crisis, Palestinians (and those who express solidarity with them) are often primarily questioned about Israel's right to exist, genocidal intentions, their relationship with Hamas, or their stance on a two-state solution. Questions about personal experiences of displacement, violence, or everyday life under occupation – and how these experiences shape their political beliefs, preferences, and desires – are largely avoided. In contrast, Israelis are often portrayed either as symbols of idealized liberal democracy within cultural-essentialist narratives or as referents for identity politics and historical responsibility. In the German context, for example, Israel's right to exist has become a proxy for national pride and even synonymous with Germany's right to exist as a state after the horrors it brought upon the world under Nazi rule.[12] Like Palestinians, Israelis are thereby stripped of their subjectivity, albeit in fundamentally different ways. Within popular narratives that reduce Middle Eastern violence to questions of fate, there is little room for diversity, ambiguity, or the acceptance of perspectives that challenge essentialist stereotypes and humanize both Israeli and Palestinian experiences. Their lived realities are, at best, mediated, abstracted, and reframed by officials, journalists, academics, and other brokers of knowledge to serve political purposes. At worst, these realities are excluded, suppressed, and denied legitimate language.

The notion of a "semantic void" serves as a powerful metaphor to describe the glaring silences in debates on Israel/Palestine. In this essay, we understand it as a form of negation in interpersonal and societal discourses – a lack of linguistic recognition. Originally introduced by linguist Menachem Dagut in the field of translation studies, the concept describes the challenge of achieving equivalence when translating between two languages. Dagut argues that language, with its vast capacity to represent human experiences, inevitably undergoes a process of controlled selectivity. Within different linguistic communities, language is subject to various contestations, and the resulting vocabulary reflects which experiences are considered meaningful enough to be signified. It differs between communities: "In most cases, the blank spaces on the lexical 'map' of one language will not coincide with those on the lexical 'map' of another. For it is hardly surprising that languages should differ in their lexical selections, just as they differ in their phonological and syntactical structures."[13]

Dagut exemplifies this with the Hebrew word *ma'pil*, which encapsulates the situational features of "Immigrant to Israel + time of British Mandate + so-called

illegal."[14] This term holds a well-defined place in the national consciousness and emotional landscape of Hebrew speakers but lacks an equivalent in other languages. The connotative force of the original is necessarily lost in paraphrases of *ma'pil*.

A similar semantic void exists with Arabic terms like *sumud* or *nakba*, which have been central to controversies over the Gaza war.[15] As political scientists Majd Abuamer and Yara Nassar emphasize, these terms carry significant analytical value.[16] As Indigenous concepts, they embody collective experiences of extensive violence, national consciousness, and a specific understanding of temporality. The term *nakba*, they argue, offers context-specificity as a concept deeply rooted in Palestinian experience and perceptions of Israeli policies. Attempts to translate this concept as *disaster* or *catastrophe*, or to paraphrase it as *genocide* or *forced displacement*, create a void that hinders a precise understanding of the social reality it describes.

As *nakba* and other Indigenous concepts have been largely erased from global discourses on Israel/Palestine, and from the lexical maps of those interpreting the violence in Gaza, the semantic space to signify the Gaza war has been populated by more abstract vocabulary. Decoupled from primary experiences, this vocabulary has become a secondary battleground over the signification of the war in Palestine/Israel, and an implicit loyalty test for academic researchers.

There is considerable danger in academic abstraction when addressing pervasive semantic gaps. What exactly are we discussing when we talk about "Gaza" or "October 7"? Is it a story of *resistance*, highlighting "antagonistic practices that operate beneath formal, organized politics"?[17] This framing turns the discussion into one about ends justifying means, with the October 7 massacre as a mere symptom. Alternatively, talk of *self-defense* shifts the focus primarily to Israeli reactions and the perception of October 7 as an existential threat. Emphasizing *terrorism*, in turn, directs the debate toward the ideological motives and tactical calculations of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, aligning it with dominant tendencies to explain excessive mass violence like that of October 7.

Which of these perspectives we emphasize or avoid in our narratives of the Gaza war has become more than an empirical choice. Although these terms do not necessarily signal a specific political stance or epistemic commitment, they have become declarations of faith in debates about Gaza. Political scientist Peter Lintl, in discussing "apartheid and antisemitism as prisms," notes how individual analytical terms can become normatively loaded. When leveraged primarily to legitimize or delegitimize the use of violence, they come to "ingrain a clear moral and political imperative, that compels also outsiders to condemn the respective perpetrator and side with the victim. In short: The concepts are able to formulate a new narration [. . .], largely free from complexities and nuances: There are two sides and one is legitimate, while the other is not."[18] Political scientists Hanna Pfeifer and Irene Weipert-Fenner thus describe the structuring of the German

debate on the Gaza war as akin to a "war discourse" characterized by polarization into a friend-enemy schema, the negation of moral ambiguity, and the justification of one conflict party's actions by the other's previous actions.[19]

While these tendencies, which discredit reflection and distancing as inappropriate, accompany various conflicts, the language used to describe the violence in Gaza has become the center of a particularly fierce battle, stripping an increasing number of concepts of their analytical value and reducing them to markers of identity and moral status. The forced transformation of specific terms into political loyalty tests functions as a form of semantic surveillance. Much like traditional surveillance, the policing of language imposes norms and acceptable responses. Anthropologist Narges Bajoghli writes: "If a subject knows she is being surveilled, she is supposed to act within a set of norms in order to prove that she has nothing to hide and is not involved in any activity that would be a threat to the state."[20]

As a result, many beyond those directly affected by censorship, repression, or canceling have withdrawn from public discourse on Middle East politics or political action related to the Gaza war. This is particularly evident in the German context, where, as Anderson describes, "'prepolitical' normative and conceptual commitments (mixed, of course, with a bit of self-serving politics)" have shaped debates in a way that reinforces German postwar identity but provides a poor foundation for a clearheaded analysis of violence in Israel/Palestine.[21]

As German language scholar David D. Kim argues, in Germany, the collective moral and historical responsibility for addressing the Holocaust under National Socialism has led to a "universalization of human suffering resulting from the traumatic experiences of Jews during the Second World War" as the primary measure of putative crimes against humanity.[22] This mechanism is encapsulated in the German concept of *Staatsräson* (reason of state). In the context of the Gaza war, this empty signifier – characterized by its "broad moral reach" but "little specification of behavioral instructions" – has entered the vocabulary of a global antiwar movement.[23] There it describes an abstract clash of values rooted in Germany's traditional support for Israel, a consequence of the Holocaust, alongside its explicit postwar commitment to domestic pluralism and a rights-centered world order. Within Germany's public discourse, by contrast, Staatsräson has had more tangible effects, fueling an increasingly vicious carceral politics of "anti-anti-Semitism."[24] Most notably, it has constrained the language to articulate the violence in Gaza and Israel. As one author, writing anonymously, noted,

> Germany does not deny the history and ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people per se, but allows its depiction and analysis only according to German terms. The terms on which Palestine can be discussed are heavily constricted and monitored, resulting in a reduced understanding of Palestinian experiences, perspectives and analysis.[25]

The fact that the author of these thoughts, published in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, chose to withhold their name underscores the extent of language policing. This policing has significantly impacted spaces for critical debate at German universities, particularly in Middle East scholarship. Amid unprecedented destruction and human suffering in Gaza, protest events, university camps, living rooms, reading circles, and online forums have become crucial spaces of contestation and critical archiving, where subaltern narratives are shared and preserved, dominant narratives of the war are questioned, and theoretical concepts to capture the unfolding violence are critically discussed. By contrast, debates within academic institutions have remained somewhat detached from empirical realities.[26] In his critique of a controversial statement by several renowned German scholars against genocide accusations directed at Israel, philosopher Azmi Bishara highlights the abstraction and detachment of academic discourse from the actual events in Gaza: "Instead of criticizing the war that is actually underway, Habermas chooses to focus on a hypothetical war being waged in line with 'guiding principles,' which include 'the prevention of civilian casualties,' and has the goal of 'future peace.'"[27]

The restriction of language also leads to epistemic pitfalls. When there is no language to signify the experiences of a suffering people, attempts to fill this gap can still negate the recognition of their realities. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's repeated remarks that the people of Khan Younes, Gaza City, and Rafah "cannot simply vanish into thin air" highlight this negation by acknowledging Palestinians only through their absence. This confirms Said's descriptions of the Palestinian existence as one that either receives excessive attention or is made invisible.[28] It is no coincidence that the absence of language to express experiences of exile, loss, silence, and separation continues to play a significant role in Palestinian poetry. Mahmoud Darwish, in particular, has made the "presence of absence" a central theme in his work.[29]

As a result of this void, the discussion about what is actually happening to people in Gaza has largely remained a discussion of their experiences, emotions, and realities in the abstract – centered on the language to legitimately describe them. This dynamic has long been recognized by scholars of Palestinian origin. Recently, it has also affected conflict and violence researchers more broadly, who have become targets of hostility and are cast as adversaries simply because of their analytical vocabulary in describing the violence in Gaza, as if they themselves were parties to the conflict.

Political scientist Donatella della Porta has described these antagonistic politics and the aggressive campaigns mounted by the media and politicians against progressive artists and intellectuals as symptoms of a moral panic under the guise of a "war" against antisemitism.[30] This "war" has most notably manifested in the disciplining and defamation of critical voices and the policing of terminology

used to describe civilian suffering in Gaza. The term *genocide* has become particularly contentious in this context. While German politicians and analysts were quick to label Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a war of annihilation and a potential genocide, in the case of Palestine, even raising the question of whether similar accusations against Israel might be accurate has exposed analysts to allegations of antisemitism and of perpetuating the myth of Palestine as a victim.

The vocabulary used by analysts and researchers to describe Israeli actions in Gaza has become a powerful tool for marking them as politically biased or even potentially antisemitic. *Genocide* is just one of several contentious terms that have been turned into empty signifiers to delineate political camps and to assign researchers political allegiances to either side in the Gaza conflict. Terms like *antiwar*, *anticolonial*, or *pro-ceasefire* have also been instrumentalized to associate those who use them with militant groups advocating the destruction of Israel and the annihilation of Jews. Media studies scholar Nabil Echchaibi describes this vilification of language – an act of linguistic violence in itself – and the securitization of even innocuous and pacifistic vocabulary:

> Is Palestinian life so cheap that a word like "ceasefire," a mere cessation of brutalizing hostilities against a helpless and trapped civilian population, has become a trigger word, a complicated linguistic ploy for our aloof semantic games? Is ceasefire the right word? Is it genocide? Are there really innocent people in Gaza? Do we hear ourselves? The affective apathy in these questions is frightening.[31]

Even before the Gaza war, spaces for critical debate at German universities – where discussions about the normative and analytical terminology to describe violent escalation should take place – were already shrinking. The misuse of specific terminology to label researchers also predates the October 7 massacres. Most prominently, the accusations of antisemitism against historian Achille Mbembe – referred to as *Historikerstreit* 2.0 – were based specifically on the vocabulary he used to describe the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine, including terms like "colonialism" and "apartheid."[32] But since October 7, these projections of antagonism have expanded to an unprecedented range of normative and descriptive concepts, including protest slogans, analytical terms, and cultural artifacts. This vilification of language is particularly striking as it unfolds against a backdrop of (and distracts from) an unprecedented rhetorical militarization and dehumanization in Israel and Palestine.[33]

According to della Porta, the repression justified by this securitization "even extends to the expression of humanitarian concerns for the suffering of the civilian population in Gaza, which tend to be considered anti-Semitic simply because they are critical of Israel."[34] In a collaborative project, activists have created an "Archive of Silence," documenting 156 cases of silencing and deplatforming of authors, speakers, or organizations perceived as pro-Palestinian between October 7,

2023, and July 21, 2024.[35] In many instances, the mere use of specific language – such as the term *nakba*, decolonial terminology, or the word *genocide* – led to cancelation. Further repercussions have included retaliatory dismissals, suspension of funding, defamation, and private threats against researchers. Critics of Hamas and those showing solidarity with Israel have faced private threats, too, including the marking of their homes or offices with a Star of David or a red triangle. However, institutional consequences have overwhelmingly targeted scholars who emphasize the violence inflicted on Palestinians.

This repression has not been limited to those talking about the war on Gaza. It has also assumed the shape of a "campus panic," affecting even those talking about those who are talking about Gaza.[36] At German universities, researchers who refuse to condemn antiwar protests wholesale as antisemitic hate speech and who call on universities to respect students' right to protest have become targets of vicious defamation campaigns.[37] The unprecedented attempt by the German ministry of education to interfere with scholars' freedom of speech and academic freedom after the violent dissolution of a peaceful protest camp on the campus of Freie Universität Berlin are most noteworthy in this regard. On May 7, 2024, the Student Coalition Berlin established a peaceful protest camp in the university's theater courtyard to "end the genocide" and demand a boycott of Israeli institutions. Shortly after the camp was set up, university management asked the police to evict the protesters for trespassing without engaging in prior dialogue. Police cleared the area, arresting over seventy people and initiating more than one hundred fifty investigations. In response to the excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, more than three hundred lecturers from Berlin universities published an open letter criticizing how university administrators handled the protests. The letter urged the presidents of Berlin's higher education institutions to adopt a dialogical approach to contentious actions and to refrain from exposing their students to police violence and criminal prosecution.[38]

The letter avoided taking a position on the Gaza war, yet it still sparked massive moral outrage far beyond the university. Bettina Stark-Watzinger, then federal minister of education, condemned the statement on social media and in the populist tabloid *Bild*, accusing it of downplaying violence and hatred against Israel and Jews, and questioning the signatories' loyalty to the German constitution. In a move reminiscent of the public defamation of the "Academics for Peace" in Turkey, *Bild* escalated these accusations by publishing mug shots of several lecturers who signed the letter, labeling them as "perpetrators" (*UniversiTäter*). Prominent politicians supported this defamation through private complaints to the lecturers' institutions, op-eds framing the petition as antisemitic, and public demands to place "extremists" at universities under state surveillance. The ministry of education even commissioned a covert internal review to explore retracting funding from the signatories and pursuing criminal charges for incitement to hatred.

These vicious reactions had a chilling effect on public debate, highlighting the lengths to which elected officials were willing to go to restrict public speech about Gaza. They also expanded the vilification of specific vocabulary for the description of the Gaza war to now even include the absence of language: In several public statements, Stark-Watzinger emphasized that the letter had failed to mention the terror of Hamas. She thereby framed the entire affair in terms of a supposedly objective reading of the Israel/Palestine conflict while dismissing the internal and external multiplicity of perspectives on it. More important, however, her remarks showcased the growing use of "arguments from silence" to delineate political antagonism and restrict speech on Gaza.[39] This logic assumes that those who fail to openly disagree or express criticism of a position must tacitly agree with it; otherwise, they would explicitly distance themselves from it. This reasoning has placed many German academics in a difficult position. Many were appalled by the massacres of October 7, but heeding public calls to "take sides" would have reinforced a false dichotomy of the Gaza war.[40]

For many Arab and Muslim researchers, taking a public stand against terror additionally implied accepting the othering of Arabs and Muslims – of themselves – as potentially suspicious others whose democratic credentials and loyalties needed to be questioned.[41] Communications scholar Zohar Kampf has analyzed the disciplining and silencing function of calls to condemn through interviews with Arab-Israeli political representatives. He reveals that the question "Do you condemn?" essentially serves as a ritual of loyalty to the nation, forcing the questioned subject into a defensive position without the opportunity to ask questions in return.[42] Even worse, philosopher Zahi Zalloua notes, "Any hesitation, any attempt to question the terms of the question (Are you asking me to condemn the killing of civilians, armed resistance, or resistance as such? Are you asking me to give up on Palestinian unity and equality and accept indefinite Palestinian subjugation?) invites scrutiny and further speech surveillance."[43]

As the open letter affair – now widely known as #Fördergate – illustrates, staying silent is not a viable option either. On the contrary, not condemning becomes a "quotable statement."[44] The rejection of these loyalty tests and avoiding the "mini-scandals" they arouse has become a weighty reason for an increasing number of researchers not to speak out at all.[45] Consequently, there is limited awareness among the German public of the suffering in the Gaza Strip, and an even scarcer vocabulary available to address it in public discourse.

Scholars are not mere observers of discourse; they play a crucial role in shaping social reality. This privileged position carries implications beyond research quality. The power to define also entails a moral duty to resist the harmonization of vocabulary, narratives, and perspectives on the Gaza war, and to oppose the growing trend of declaring an ever-increasing list of terms as blank

spaces on the lexical map. In the social world, there have always been diverse and often irreconcilable perspectives on violent phenomena, especially in the context of social conflicts. These perspectives are inherently in tension with one another. This tension is heightened by the fact that people largely use a common language to describe their lifeworlds, identify causes, and make value judgments – even when their descriptions and evaluations differ. When we examine the various uses of the most contested terms in the context of Gaza, and the arguments in which they appear, it becomes clear that they epitomize social theorist W. B. Gallie's theories on impossible-to-define concepts: "there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use."[46]

One example is how both the Israeli military operation "Iron Sword" and the massacres of October 7 have been labeled as genocidal in academic debates, contrasting with public discourse that wrongly pits these descriptions against each other, as if evidence for one negates the other.[47] Similarly, terms like *civility* and *innocence* have been weaponized: denials of innocence have justified the incredible death toll of Israeli operations in Gaza, alongside technical terminology that disembodies Palestinian victims as collateral damage.[48] But selective uses of these terms have also served to relativize the massacres committed by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the Nova Festival and in Israeli Kibbuzim as ordinary military operations. Moreover, terms like *terror* and *terrorism* have been applied to condemn violence against both Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Both groups have reported an empathy gap and feelings of betrayal, experienced as "trauma on trauma," which have exacerbated their vulnerability to mental health issues.[49] These examples illustrate that reality is not a zero-sum game. They also show, as sociologist Charles Tilly has noted, how "some vivid terms serve political and normative ends admirably, despite hindering the description and explanation of the social phenomena they point to."[50]

Gallie aptly described the detrimental effect of debates over "essentially contested concepts" on the empirical understanding of social conflict:

> Each party continues to maintain that the special functions which the term . . . fulfils on its behalf or on its interpretation, is the correct or proper or primary, or the only important, function which the term in question can plainly be said to fulfil. Moreover, each party continues to defend its case with what it claims to be convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification.[51]

In this context, questioning which descriptive uses of labels like genocide, terror, or civility are more legitimate or less, or which better describes empirical reality, may not be the most fruitful approach to understanding violence dynamics. The impact of these subjective framings of reality unfolds independent of their accuracy. They activate collective memories and individual biographical experiences, and trigger emotional and cognitive processes that guide conflict interactions.

Instinctively dismissing partisan interpretations of the Gaza war as deviant or faulty in favor of supposedly more "objective" analyses does little to enhance our understanding of the dynamics that shape violent conflict. On the contrary, true comprehension of social phenomena is advanced through the interpretation and reinterpretation of these partial perspectives. Putting these different viewpoints into dialogue with each other is what gives the individual subjective accounts value and significance.

Uncertainty, ambiguity, and contradictions should not be met with silence. Instead, we need to acknowledge a collective academic responsibility to highlight contradictions and their impact on our world, especially in moments of conflict. This responsibility, and the duty to individually live up to it as a researcher, is not a utopian ideal. It is essentially rooted in two premises that have been central to discussions of research ethics and professional duties for the better part of the last decades.

Accuracy – naming things as they are – is a foundational principle in both journalism and academic research. The imperative to accurately report arises from a commitment to truth and an ethical obligation to bear witness to the realities of violence, regardless of who benefits from the report or whether it aligns with the views of one conflict faction over another. Journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel emphasize accuracy as a cornerstone of journalistic integrity, essential for maintaining public trust.[52] This principle is equally crucial in conflict research, where biases can exacerbate tensions and influence the trajectory of a conflict.[53] In the context of violent conflict, accuracy involves not only factual correctness but also a comprehensive portrayal of events without favoritism.[54] This does not mean remaining indifferent. On the contrary, it means disclosing our normative position and foregrounding why we should not be indifferent.[55]

Scholars have explored the significant impact that secondary representations can have on conflict dynamics. Conflict coverage can shape public perception, influence policy, and affect international responses and conflict management efforts.[56] On a domestic level, too, researchers have evidenced how media attention toward and framing of political violence can lead to further radicalization and violence.[57] These studies underscore the ethical responsibilities of reporting: sensationalist accounts can inflame tensions, mislead audiences, and securitize research subjects, while abstract or distanced language can downplay grievances, reduce urgency for intervention, and render violence and suffering invisible. In that sense, "writers, like all human beings, impose order on the everyday phenomena they observe."[58] As it is impossible to observe every detail and document every perspective – to provide a complete account – researchers constantly choose what to focus on and when to start and end an account, and they make literary decisions that mirror these choices. Given this inherent selectivity of all scholarly accounts, it is crucial for academ-

ics to be attentive to how their interlocutors attribute importance to specific events and experiences and to convey this meaning in a way that respects their autonomy.

Beyond professional duty, naming things – not just as they are, but as they are perceived and experienced – is an ethical obligation. Abstraction and the reframing of lifeworlds in a new terminology arguably conflict with an ethical imperative of recognition and of reporting on events in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Taking seriously the idea of research as a struggle for true understanding, as well as the imperatives of respect and recognition, requires that the subjects we study are pictured as actors and agents, not as "a screen or a ground or a resource."[59] From an ethical perspective, the least we can do in our work is to remain attentive to the truths testified by those we write about and work with, including the vocabulary they use to make sense of their experiences.[60]

The controversy over the chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" illustrates this point. Instead of engaging in essentializing debates over the slogan's putative meaning, it may be more instructive to simply ask those who use it in protest what they actually mean by it. Rather than dismissing the language by which those affected by violence articulate themselves as partial and thus inappropriate for reconstructing conflict dynamics, we should welcome the viewpoints, moral evaluations, and subjective experiences it communicates as valuable insights into divergent understandings of the reality we study.

Foregrounding primary accounts and the terminology by which research subjects themselves make sense of their experiences can foster respect and recognition of their perspectives, enhancing the authenticity and relatability of research findings. Metastudies show that participants often have strong views on ethical issues related to how their spoken words are reported and how they are represented in secondary accounts. They generally prefer verbatim transcription of their testimonies in academic reports, and their perceptions of what terms and narratives are the most significant in their accounts do not always align with authors' perceptions or intentions.[61] Sociologist Martyn Hammersley emphasizes that constructionist analyses typically rely on participants' primary experiences, feelings, and perspectives to reconstruct behavioral patterns that can be generalized.[62] However, these abstractions may conflict with the priorities of research participants regarding narrative selection and presentation, creating dilemmas related to informed consent and respecting participants' autonomy. When participants' autonomy to define their situation is denied, it breeds antagonism and deprives them of recognition. In a moving essay on the lack of mutual empathy between Arabs and Israelis after October 7, editor-in-chief of *Jewish Currents* Arielle Angel describes the devaluation that comes with abstraction: "For people who feel like their pain is being devalued, it's because it is; and that devaluation is itself a hallmark of the cycle of the diminishing value of human life."[63]

In contexts of multidirectional violence and pain, in which everyone desires recognition and visibility, collaborative approaches may best align with ethical principles of respect, inclusivity, and participant empowerment by honoring the autonomy of research participants rather than "ignoring the often debilitating constraints under which agents produce representations of their action."[64] They emphasize the idea of conducting research *with* rather than *on* people and offer fruitful avenues for mobilization and conflict studies – disciplines that have faced ample criticism for becoming too distant from their subjects and for producing knowledge irrelevant to those suffering the most from violent conflict.[65]

Taking alternative forms of knowledge generation seriously and ensuring that primary narrations of violent power relations are not simply overwritten or filtered by abstract academic conceptualization, however, does not mean we should avoid contextualizing or critically questioning the categories proposed by the subjects we study. There is a risk of reifying or generalizing participants' assumptions about the world, including those that may be factually incorrect or misrepresent others. There is also danger in romanticizing "local" knowledge. As the feminist social critic Donna Haraway points out, the standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent positions" and should thus not be exempt from critical reexamination, deconstruction, and interpretation.[66] However, researchers writing about the violent dynamics in Palestine and Israel have a responsibility to carefully navigate these tensions and engage in good faith with the categories proposed by those living these dynamics – not necessarily to prove or disprove them, but with the aim to at least try to understand them.

Violence is embedded in all knowledge production, leading to the marginalization and suppression of certain forms of knowledge. This also applies to the language used to discuss violence in the context of Gaza. Yet the parts of language that remain invisible within the institutional field of understanding often have a powerful presence. As Egyptian Jewish philosopher Edmond Jabés writes in his reflections on the meaning of the words *exile*, *loss*, and *separation*: "You make yourself void. You become silence. You become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak."[67]

As we argue in this essay, it is also imperative to listen. It is worth recalling Said's words. In the debates on October 7 and Gaza, once again, the language of those subjected to violence is pushed into metaphysical abstraction, creating a semantic void that leaves insufficient space to describe their lived reality.[68]

In this context, we argue for a dual responsibility of scholars to reopen this space, to address the semantic void. Talking and writing about resistance and violence inherently involves practicing a form of violence; the least we can do in our work is foreground the experiences of those affected by it and defend their space in public debates. This requires modesty in our claims to truth, especially when

dealing with essentially contested concepts. It also demands awareness of the exclusions in our observations and the blank spaces on our lexical map. As political scientists Werner Distler and Mariam Salehi emphasize, the categories and meanings of the terms we use to describe what we see – in Israel and Palestine, whether from afar or up close – are "not static or self-evident, but dynamic and linked to specific knowledge frameworks. Epistemological choices and options matter greatly in constituting meaning, understanding, and expertise."[69]

Knowledge is always generated from a specific perspective, shaped by the social positioning and bodily experiences of the knower. Instead of striving for a universal perspective, we ought to embrace different and divergent views on the violence in Israel/Palestine as "positioned truths."[70] Rather than dismissing specific terms and the perspectives they represent as morally wrong in a "war of position" over the hegemonic narrative about the Gaza war, we should realize that these views come from somewhere.[71] We may not need to take a side *in* the conflict, but we must strive to understand different perspectives *on* the conflict and relay them in ethical and precise ways. It is in times of war and polarization that academic integrity and ethical commitment are tested. How we write and talk about violence reflects this integrity and commitment.

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ENDNOTES

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