**Judgement, Academic Responsibility & Palestine:**

**Neutrality as a Practice**

Christopher Parker

**Abstract:**

*What might it mean to claim that the institution of science, together with the universities within which science is taught and practiced, should be “value-neutral?” And what might such a claim imply for the moral, political and academic responsibilities of both individual scholars and the academic community as a whole? Today, as we face challenges ranging from GenAI to genocide, such questions seem particularly urgent.*

*Consider Palestine. For more than a year now, voices within (and beyond) higher education have invoked the notion of “academic neutrality” to counter the growing number of students and scholars calling for their institutions to break or suspend ties with Israel. Some of these voices have even gone so far as to question whether academics can legitimately take a stand on whether Israeli’s crimes in Gaza amount to genocide. To do so, they suggest, is to take sides in a “political dispute,” and thus to invoke judgement on a question that falls outside the concerns and competences of science. Drawing on a discussion of occupation, apartheid and genocide—three legal terms that have been applied to characterize Israel’s relation to the Palestinian people and their land—my talk will examine the implications of invoking academic neutrality in this way.*

*Ultimately, I argue that the notion of “value-neutral” science is necessarily incoherent, if only because neutrality itself is a value. But, in arguing against “value-neutrality,” I don’t mean to imply that neutrality has no value. Rather, I suggest that how we conceptualize neutrality, and how we situate our concept in relation to the exercise of judgement, matters. Those arguing for “academic neutrality” in the sense discussed above do so in a way that ultimately trivializes the academic responsibility to exercise judgement. They adopt the position of a nature documentary that doesn’t judge the lion for devouring the zebra, and only ponders “the laws of nature” thus revealed. Neutrality is here invoked as an external (cognitive) imperative that imposes itself in ways that preclude both judgement and action.*

*Fortunately, there is a more useful way to approach the problem: consider, by way of analogy, the neutrality of the referee in a football match, for whom the principle imposes a positive responsibility of both judgement and action. Rather than situating neutrality as an external value, imposed from outside, it is exercised within a field of practice, and within recognized “rules of the game.” As Hannah Arendt noted in her* Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, “In Kant judgement emerges as a particular talent which can be practiced only and not taught.” Similarly, academic neutrality should be understood not as a position, but as a practice—a disposition and ability that must be exercised, articulated and understood in function of judgement if it is to appear in any meaningful way. Through the talk and subsequent discussion, we will put this disposition to work in the context of ongoing events in Gaza and consider what it might imply for our responsibilities as members of the global academic community.*

***Bio:***

*Prof. dr. Christopher Parker is a political theorist based at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies at Ghent University, Belgium. He is affiliated with the Middle East and North Africa Research Group and the Ghent Center for World Studies. From 2015-2022, he served as co-director of the international “Bachelor in Social Sciences” program, a joint initiative of Ghent University and the Free University of Brussels. He is currently responsible for four courses: “Communicating Scientific Knowledge” (a writing-based introduction to critical thinking and philosophy of science); “Critical Thinking in Political Science”; “Politics and Society in a Global World” (this year and last organized around the theme of “Global Palestine”) and “Master’s Dissertation II: Advanced Research Seminar in Global Studies.”*

*Parker’s research focuses on “power-in-practice,” investigating how power arises from—and finds its political possibilities determined by—practical (sociotechnical, ecological, historical and, ultimately, “more-than-human”) arrangements of collective life. His early work focused on efforts to engineer foundations of [neo]liberal government in Palestine (after 1993), Iraq (after 2003) and Jordan (after 2006), and on the forms of “popular politics” and resistance that emerged in response to these “technopolitical” initiatives.*

*During the past decade, Parker has supervised fifteen competitively funded research projects, each of which involve tracing a key genealogy of liberal political thought and practice. Indeed: the investigation of power-in-practice points to the colonial underbelly of “global knowledge,” and to the constitutive entanglement of scientific knowledge and political power/interest more generally. It also draws attention to the performativity of scientific discourse, raising questions about the positionality (and responsibilities) of the scientific observer. Via an exposition of the problem of “academic neutrality” as it might apply to an account of ongoing events in Gaza, these issues will provide the backdrop for Parker’s contribution.*