

Decolonizing Truth: Lessons from Palestine

BY SOPHIA ZISAKOU

PhD candidate in Sociology
of Law at Lund University

ESSAY

This essay reflects on the notions of objectivity and truth. Taking Palestine as an urgent political call and a precondition for a decolonial future, it argues that in the context of genocidal violence and the systematic distortion of reality, objectivity and truth cannot be dismissed merely as tools of oppression. Instead, approaching them as counter-narratives grounded in embodied experiences that have been violently erased by colonial apparatuses of knowledge production, this essay reclaims truth as situated and from below and as a potential vehicle of justice and epistemic resistance.

When we speak of these horrors, inherent to Zionist ideology, we are perceived at best as passionate and at worst, angry and hateful. But in reality, we are simply reliable narrators. I say we are reliable narrators not because we are Palestinians. It is not on an identitarian basis that we must claim the authority to narrate. Rather it is because history tells us that those who have oppressed, who have monopolized and institutionalized violence, will not tell the truth, let alone hold themselves accountable.

Mohammed El-Kurd,
Perfect Victims (2025, pp. 157-158)

I want to begin this text by saying: there are no words to speak about Gaza. As I write this short piece, I find myself writing, rewriting, erasing, stuck with the question: How can one epistemologically translate, discursively or affectively, one of the greatest dystopias of our time? How could words ever do justice to what is most unjust around us? At the same time, I am thinking about the consequences of speaking about Gaza: the censorship within academia, the loss of our colleagues, both physically and metaphorically. The ongoing epistemicide, not only in Gaza, but across the universities globally. The epistemicide and epistemic oppression that resides in the refusal to speak, to recognise, to register something as self-evident and fundamental as truth. It is in this context that I decided to write this piece and reflect on the notions of objectivity and truth. Concepts central to

epistemics, to history, to everyday life, that we have been so violently deprived of, and which, once again, has come to the forefront of our current, cruel (academic) realities.

CRUEL OBJECTIVITY

I am writing this in June 2025, after nearly twenty months of witnessing a live-streamed genocide in Gaza. Twenty months of unimaginable suffering, mass killings, deliberate starvation, and the systematic destruction of hospitals, schools, universities, and civilian infrastructure. Twenty months during which Western academic institutions have continued to insist that academia should not take a stance and must remain “neutral”. Cloaked in the language of political neutrality, universities across Europe and the US, most of which maintain institutional ties with Israeli universities that promote and sustain the genocidal economy (Wind, 2024), label the genocide in Gaza “too political” to engage with.

Within this landscape, not only are political critiques of settler colonialism and Zionism deemed unacceptable, but even simpler factual references to the current situation in Gaza are dismissed as antisemitic, untrue, or mere opinions. Meanwhile, Palestinians continue to be massively murdered, displaced, maimed, starved, and dehumanized in dominant discourse, opposition to the genocidal Israeli politics, to war crimes and crimes against humanity are reduced to a matter of personal conviction and a mere opinion. In parallel, the expression of solidarity with any lawful and democratic claim according to international law for justice and freedom in Palestine is systematically framed as antisemitic and brutally censored (Pervez, 2025; Zisakou et al., 2025). Academics who speak out in support of Palestine are threatened, placed on leave, or dismissed altogether (Fúnez-Flores, 2024; Ivasiuc, 2025; Kassamali, 2025). Within this academic environment, shaped and sustained by (the coloniality of) a neutrality, silence is framed as academic virtue. Refusing to take a political, epistemological, or ethical stance on genocide, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, occupation, subjugation

tion, and the dispossession of Palestine is not seen as complicity, but as the recommended and morally endorsed, “neutral” intellectual position. In academic apparatuses where ignorance has been historically deployed as a strategic tool of (re)producing colonial knowledge, as Ann Laura Stoler (2016) has pointed out, silence, self-censorship, individualism, and lack of political engagement are gold. In this way, objectivity and neutrality are constructed not only through what is said, but also through what is not said, and silence and erasure produce their normalising effects (Butler, 2004). Under this ongoing silencing the repression of pro-Palestinian protests in our campuses, the harassment and intimidation of critical academics who do not refuse to take a stance, and the institutional sanctions against expressions of solidarity are normalized, being portrayed not as acts of violence or censorship, but as responses to antisemitism, dangerous politicization, and even terrorism. According to this violent distorted version of what’s actually happening, speaking out against the genocide constitutes the problem and not the genocide itself.

In this apparatus of surveillance, truth and objectivity in their colonial construction are so blatantly distorted as related to power shaping a new neofascist regime of (post-)truth according to which objectivity is only needed when it serves the white, Zionist agenda. Rather than reflecting truth, objectivity is shaped by those who, through access to power, position themselves as the subjects of reason and knowledge. This positioning is, of course, neither new nor ahistorical and does not occur in a vacuum but traces back to Enlightenment, when white, masculinist, western-centric epistemologies normalised the occupation of invisible privileges, masking inequality under claims of universal equality (Mahmood, 2009). By relying on unmarked gendered, racialised, and classed privileges, the concept of objectivity has historically functioned to delegitimise certain bodies as incapable of reason or knowledge and to refuse certain embodied realities, lived experiences and truths as partial, specific, and less objective. This dynamic is especially visible today as neoconservative (far) right politics selectively reject even the most “objective”

domains, such as historical scholarship, empirical sciences, statistical data, and legal principles along with the rulings of international courts, whenever these support equality, human rights, social justice, and the Palestinian struggle against occupation, apartheid, and genocide. Although white-centred institutions of meritocracy, which produce “high” and supposedly objective theory, teach us that knowledge is rooted in observation, facts, and evidence, the neo-fascist realities we are witnessing, both within and beyond academia, expose how so-called objectivity is often detached from verifiable facts, material conditions, and the lived experiences of marginalised, non-normative subjects. This applies even when such realities are recorded, documented, and thus “proven”. Relying instead on affective narratives tied to white supremacy, neo-fascist politics undermine the legitimacy of evidence, material experience, legal principles, and historical truths when they challenge their exclusionary ideals and their version of what should count as truth. Under this Orwellian regime of post-truth a blatantly distorted reality is constructed as objective representation.

In this political moment, despite a growing, rather independent, academic movement in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, most institutional academic spaces and networks, including those that identify as critical or decolonial, have to a great extent, failed us. While theoretical and conceptual frameworks are inherently limited in their ability to grasp the scale of destruction in Gaza, a particular silence has settled over self-proclaimed critical academic spaces (Perez, 2025; Zisakou et al., 2025). As colonial discourses on “neutrality” unapologetically render Palestine the exception to free speech and academic freedom (Fúnez-Flores, 2024) – though free speech has never been truly free, always conditioned by interlocking systems of oppression – many institutional “decolonial” spaces have often remained silent. Instead, we witness the language of decolonisation increasingly deployed as a tick-box exercise and an empty signifier stripped of its radical political edge, repurposed as an epistemological self-justification for epistemic whiteness. This version of normative institutionally

assimilated “decolonisation” avoids confronting the ongoing genocide in Gaza, marginalises Palestine, and refuses to acknowledge it as a site of colonial violence. Through a whitewashed, co-opted, sanitised version of decolonisation, institutional often “critical”, and “decolonial” forums remain silent, avoiding the naming or denouncing of genocide (Ivasiuc, 2025; Zisakou et al., 2025). Conferences, events, and workshops on decolonisation often fail to mention Gaza at all, or when they do, through a rather tokenistic approach, they frame Palestine as a neutral, depoliticised object of academic inquiry. Even as decolonisation is invoked in abstract terms, Palestine is erased from acknowledgements, as if decolonisation was a static archive of the distant past, rather than a confrontation with the colonial present (Fúnez-Flores, 2024). As Hanna Al-Taher and Anna-Esther Younes (2024) warn, these same institutions will, in time, claim they were always on the right side of history, transforming Palestine into yet another white archive of objective knowledge: an object of detached, scientific observation, stripped of its political urgency and struggle.

Writing these reflections in a rather critical tone, I feel the necessity to clarify that my intention here is not to assign political blame to specific scholars individually, but rather to address silence and silencing on Palestine as a structural issue in academia. In this sense, I want to acknowledge how precarity, insecurity, overwork, anxiety, stress, and burnout are material and affective conditions we experience that shape our silences. These are the consequences of neoliberal academic politics and the effects of an ongoing debilitation, especially for early-career and precariously employed, racialised academics navigating colonial institutions in the Global North (Mohamed, 2024). Thus, the challenge we face, especially as precarious scholars, is double: not only how to speak and resist the erasure of a genocide, but also how to survive in systems that drain and wear us out, while rewarding our detachment and punishing our solidarity.

And so, amidst despair and frustration, anxiety and exhaustion, caught between resistance and compli-

ance, passivity and action, numbed by the current sociopolitical climate and its management by academic institutions, I want to reflect on truth and objectivity, not only as instruments of epistemic oppression, but also as liminal spaces and potential vehicles of epistemic resistance. While frustration has permeated both political and academic circles, this mourning is not, as Judith Butler (2004) reminds us, a solitary act, but a collective one. Grief, as a political act and form of dependency, is not a return to the self, but a disorientation that opens us to others. However, as we (un) learn from queer critique (Cvetkovich, 2012; Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2006), it is precisely within this collective failure, depression, insecurity, trauma, and vulnerability that hope becomes possible. It is there where we forge ties, come closer, and build our communities, in the cracks of structurally complicit academic spaces and in fleeting moments of collective solidarity.

And so, drawing on our shared vulnerability and affect, on pain, anger, outrage, disgust, horror, and grief, Palestine emerges not only as a political struggle, but also as an epistemic method of relationality and resistance that decentres the dilemma between the self and the other. A decolonial method that in the current reality becomes our epistemic and political anticolonial compass (Ivasiuc, 2025; Kabel, 2024) in destabilising, resituating, and even queering objectivity as a mode of creating counter-archives of truth. Not truth as the white neutrality that abjectifies Palestinian bodies rendering them disposable and ungrievable, as either victims or terrorists, but as a reimagining and reinscription of what has been delegitimised, because it refuses to serve whiteness and colonial power. A truth from below, spoken and recorded by those whose lives have been rendered impossible and unimaginable by dominant narratives of truth.

OBJECTIVITIES FROM BELOW

The questioning of objectivity and truth has long been central to critical theories. Critical race, decolonial, indigenous, poststructuralist, feminist, and

queer epistemologies have long before problematised the concepts of objectivity, impartiality, and truth, as reproduced within positivist, empiricist, and de-politicised academic frameworks. According to this critique, objectivity, despite being framed as neutral, rational, and disembodied, is discursively and affectively produced, shaped by unquestioned colonial and white-centred notions of belonging.

However, the brutal epistemological and epistemic normalisation of the genocide and the regularisation of censorship, silencing, and (police) violence in the name of neutrality and (academic) freedom of speech, which I tried to describe above, compels us to reflect further on this framing. Although, notions of objectivity and truth have historically served as conceptual frameworks for the production of colonial and heteropatriarchal knowledge, positioning racialised and feminised others as purportedly irrational and overemotional, in the current political framework the situation looks different. Simply put, in a context where blatant lies are presented as facts, objectivity and truth cannot only be dismissed as mere colonial constructs or systems of oppression. The violent distortion of lived experiences and material realities of the Palestinian people, political activists and academics, has made the need to reclaim, redefine, and renegotiate concepts such as objectivity and truth even more urgent.

Thus, while acknowledging the deep entanglement of objectivity and truth with structures of domination, I want to argue, by taking Palestine as both an urgent theoretical and political call and an analytical method, for the necessity of revisiting and reconceptualising these concepts as part of a broader anti-colonial struggle for justice. Palestine, as an embodied reality and a materiality that can no longer be negated or refused, becomes an analytical tool to mobilise and decolonise objectivity and truth in the way Donna Haraway (1997) envisions objectivity as a practice of seeing from below: a partial, situated, and embodied perspective that disrupts the epistemic violence of normative homogenised objectivity as proximity to whiteness and foregrounds the affective,

material, and lived experiences of marginalised and racialised communities. In this sense, Palestine exposes entrenched power dynamics and unsettles the white archives of “impartial” knowledge. Rather than conforming to dominant discourses of erasure and silencing, Palestine forces us to reclaim objectivity as accountable, situated, and embodied. It asserts an urgent claim to a counter-archive of truth, one that registers the cruelty of the present, resists its erasure, and gestures toward a decolonial future that refuses the realism and cruel pragmatism of white neutrality as we experience it today.

Drawing on truth, as a genealogy of power relations through which knowledge is produced (Foucault, 1978), reimagining objectivity through Palestine rejects truth as universal, static, or decontextualised. Instead, it is a constant reminder that truth is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a site of conflict where what counts as knowledge is always entangled with structures of domination and resistance. In this way, truth as a contested and political terrain, shaped through situated power relations, epistemic struggles, and embodied positionalities becomes an assemblage, always partial and entangled, seeking to uncover what has been erased and silenced.

In this (un)making of truth, forming epistemic resistances and coalitions that expose the power relations played out in the history of objective truth's production is crucial. Under the current racist, white-supremacist, Zionist politics, which are simultaneously anti-feminist, anti-queer, and anti-trans, Palestine becomes a meeting point for coalitional politics and a collective claim to liberation. It becomes a collective refusal to be silenced, assimilated, or coopted, recognising that the oppression of some is the oppression of all and that none of us are free until all of us are free. This coalitional work demands that we mobilise the tools available to us, including concepts such as objectivity and truth, while remaining critically attuned to their histories, limitations, and the risks of being disciplined by them.

For this reason, taking Palestine as an epistemic re-

sistance and a method of narrating truth, our focus is on the marginal, the unrecognized, and the unregistered, aiming to restore its objectivity through redefining, resignifying and reregistering the concept from below. Instead of rejecting the idea of objectivity entirely, we reclaim it beyond the white-centred, logocentric, detached high theories established as universal knowledge, arguing for vulnerable, low, and weak objectivities as embodied, situated, feminist practices; objectivities that are simultaneously black, queer, trans, disabled, old, poor, not in essentialist or identitarian terms, but as alternative modalities of knowledge, as subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1980), and as modes of imagining and building future worlds where marginalised material realities and lived experiences are being seen, heard, and recognised as truths because they matter; worlds in which we can breathe and coexist because we create and share our own objectivities beyond the normative violence of interlocking systems of oppression.

Through these lenses, Palestine, as a material reality that can no longer be negated or refused, becomes both the vision and the necessary precondition for

an alternative decolonial future rooted in liberation and justice. Palestine as a method of narrating truth reminds us that decolonial theories are not metaphors or empty conceptual containers, but praxis; that decolonisation is not an abstract gesture, but an urgent, embodied demand, inseparable from the material conditions of liberation struggles. In this urgent present, Palestine emerges as a poetic, world-making horizon for imagining the future differently. Poetic, not in contrast to materiality and practice, and practice not as a quick, result-oriented, neoliberal demand for productivity, but as a continuous, generative process and an ongoing making-future that opens up a space of potentiality. A modality of dreaming, resisting, and materialising a collective future that, while fully recognising the brutality of the here-and-now, refuses the entrenched realism of dispossession, occupation, and subjugation, the violence of borders and the tyranny of nation-states as the only imaginable order. And this future, woven through our togethernesses and born of our truths and our struggles draws nearer; a fragile and vulnerable horizon, yet unmistakably real and true, even within the dystopian here-and-now.

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