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Yes, our universities should take a stand against genocide

Significance:

This article is a response to a perspective that universities should be neutral in the context of genocide. We argue that the academy is not a value-free space and that intellectual pursuits must be informed by a commitment to human rights. As such, universities must be spaces of critical pedagogy and engaged scholarship, where teaching and learning must support the quest for better, egalitarian, and more just societies. It is therefore incumbent on tertiary institutions to take a clear stand against the genocide occurring in Gaza and call for a just peace in Palestine.

It is indisputable that the university is a contested space where epistemologies, ideas, ideologies, cultures and values clash, usually collegially but sometimes conflictually. Nor are science or academia value-neutral. The history of science and knowledge production is replete with examples of how both were and are used to promote specific ideologies of racism, colonialism and apartheid. The university is also a site of the reproduction of ideology and power, as was the case at Stellenbosch University vis a vis the Afrikaaner nationalist agenda. Some dominant and hegemonic trends have been challenged in South African universities through the Fallist movement, the imperative for transformation, and the decolonial turn. It is only those steeped in dominant hegemonic cultures, power structures and narratives who view the university as a neutral space, outside of society and its complex challenges, and uninfluenced by power, both manifest and hidden.

Coming from South Africa – a country that has experienced the brutal power of settler-colonialism, capitalism and apartheid – Professor Chetty’s Commentary, entitled ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’¹, should have greater insight into the workings of power in various institutions inside and outside the state, including universities. Prior to 1994, South African universities as sites of state hegemony were challenged by the anti-apartheid movement – faculty, students, staff, community and workers. For example, the University of the Western Cape, under the leadership of Professor Jakes Gerwel, directly challenged the state by branding his institution as the “home of the left”, a deeply political and courageous act. Universities and academics across the globe supported the struggle against apartheid, either through participation in the academic boycott or through boycotts and divestments. Tertiary institutions were contested spaces, with faculty holding differing views on boycotts, academic freedom, and the role of education as a tool for liberation. Universities took political positions – some progressive, others deeply reactionary. In the democratic era, the vision and mission statements of many universities extol the virtues of social justice, human rights, and societal benefit. For example, the University of Cape Town, in its 2030 vision statement, bravely proclaims its transformative purpose to “unleash human potential to create a fair and just society”. If not given effect to in any meaningful way, such statements ring hollow and are tantamount to virtue signalling, absent of any real commitment to social justice.

As Professor Saleem Badat has argued, the academy is not a value-free space and intellectual pursuits should be informed by a commitment to human rights.² Rather than places of neutrality, universities in all places should be front and centre in support of human rights and academic freedom, and consequently should stand in solidarity with Palestinian universities, scholars and students. They should be spaces of critical pedagogy where power structures are challenged rather than reinforced and where teaching, learning and research, all core functions of the university, support the struggle for non-racialism, non-sexism and social justice.

Aside from personal political choices, our experiences are rooted in political circumstances, systems of power and experiences of discrimination. The privilege of being ‘apolitical’ is only afforded to some. Black people’s experiences have been shaped by their position as an underclass, while white people’s experiences are shaped by their position as an overclass. This positionality grants the latter power to say that politics is not important because they have been its constant beneficiaries, but not the former who have been its victims – victims of science, medicine, sociology, politics and demography, and victims of access and language, all of which were designed and used to exclude and oppress them.

Genocide as a human rights matter

Professor Chetty’s position is betrayed when he states that the Gaza genocide is a “political matter” being brought into a university discussion, “bringing unnecessary tension amongst ourselves”. It is surely incontrovertible that mass murder, including the deliberate annihilation of children and adult non-combatants, scholasticide, epistemicide, the destruction of homes, hospitals, schools, universities, and cemeteries, denial of medical care, and starvation, are war crimes. In terms of international humanitarian law, these crimes are far beyond what Professor Chetty refers to as a “political conflict”. Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, stated in March 2024 that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating the commission of the crime of genocide... has been met”³. American-Israeli historian and genocide expert Omer Bartov, himself a former Israeli military commander, has stated that Israel’s actions in Gaza are “a combination of genocidal action, ethnic cleansing and annexation of the Gaza Strip”⁴. The International Court of Justice has ruled that Israel should take steps to prevent genocide from occurring in Gaza and should prevent and punish incitement to commit genocide.⁵ By all accounts, the events that we have witnessed in Gaza for over a year now should be called for what they are – beyond war crimes, it is a genocide.

Genocide is a human rights matter on which universities as institutions of learning must take a clear stand. This is particularly important as every university, institution of learning, and cultural centre has been deliberately destroyed

in Gaza by Israel and professors and teachers have been murdered en masse. It is incumbent on scholars around the world to stand in solidarity with those colleagues who have either been killed or are at risk of annihilation.

Whataboutism

Professor Chetty raises the usual trope of whataboutism – Sudan, Congo, etc. Whataboutism is a rhetorical technique that deflects attention away from the genocide being perpetrated in Gaza. Yet, implicit in this objection is an acceptance, rather than a denial, of the fact that Israel is committing crimes against humanity. He states that “if we comment on one major human rights issue, then we should make every effort to comment on essentially every other major human rights catastrophe”. This is a false assertion that, unless we take a position on every issue, we cannot take a position on any issue, however egregious it may be. Further, neither Professor Chetty nor supporters of Israel have any abiding interest in supporting the people of the Congo or Sudan, whom they simply instrumentalise as useful black bodies to justify genocide. By the logic of whataboutism, no university should have made a statement against apartheid because there were other injustices taking place around the world.

In a political context, one does not surrender because there is complexity, or because a minefield of complexity has been manufactured to confuse, obfuscate, and create despair and thus apathy, so that the truth can never be determined. While it is incumbent on academics to seek the truth, it is not possible to attend to all war crimes occurring around the globe. The Gaza genocide is front and centre on our screens every day, aided and abetted by Western nations, most prominently the USA, UK and Germany, and by Israeli universities.

For public institutions to be silent or neutral on the matter of genocide amounts to complicity. Similarly, for Professor Chetty to suggest that a public stand against crimes against humanity is “populist” or “jumping on the bandwagon” is obscene and morally unconscionable. He seems to suggest that the “high road” is silence and apathy. Further, condemning genocide has nothing to do with “competitor universities”. It has everything to do with the institutional culture of our tertiary institutions – a culture of standing firm against war crimes and genocide and in support of human rights, and upholding the values of freedom, dignity, and the right to life. Imagine if this were Germany in 1935, with a holocaust being inflicted on victims, or the British concentration camps in South Africa in 1900, or the German genocide of the Herero and Nama people in 1904. It is doubtful that Professor Chetty would be making the same point about silence. Whataboutism can cut both ways.

There are bound to be differing views at any university, but if there are indeed “differing views” about whether genocide or mass starvation of a population as an instrument of war are morally acceptable practices, as Professor Chetty seems to suggest, then we require a very deep rethink about our values, our morality and our ethics. In fact, to say that “we need to be careful about thinking about this in binary form” or there can be “little consensus” on this matter is outrageous. This is very much a binary matter – no excuse or apologist can find a suitable morality for the deliberate murder of 17 000 children in Gaza. There is a simple binary choice: either silence and thus complicity with genocide, or condemnation.

Any honest historical text will expose the current genocide as part of a continuing ethnic cleansing campaign against the Palestinian people, perpetrated by the ethnoreligious supremacist Israeli state since 1948.⁶ To suggest that activists against the genocide are using the university to “fight our own personal political battles” amounts to ignorance of history and betrays a deep right-wing personal predilection. Activist scholars are guided by the lodestars of human rights, freedom and justice.

The loud silence from the Academy of Science of South Africa

Professor Chetty suggests that we learn from the stance taken by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). However, a year and a half into the genocide, ASSAf has not yet issued a statement on the matter. In its silence, ASSAf has failed the test of moral clarity.

The Gaza genocide is not a human drama in which two opposing sides represented by standing armies are engaged in a conflict. The Palestinian people are defenceless against the military might of the Israeli state, a nuclear power that is intent on mass murder. This is not simply a matter of two sides in conflict, but a question of enduring state-sanctioned violence and the erasure of Palestinian society in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem and in parts of Israel. What is going on is the destruction of Palestinian life, society, history, knowledge, culture, and infrastructure at the hands of Israel, the most powerful military force in the region.

As the highest academic decision-making body of the university, and one central in its moral and ethical position, it is critical for the senate at each university to adopt a motion condemning genocide and to call, at a minimum, for a ceasefire in Gaza. Such an act is far more meaningful than for individual members of the senate to sign a statement in their individual capacity.

Funding: The lifeblood of universities

Universities frequently invoke the risk of donor flight should they take a position against the genocide, risking funding for research and students in need. While this may be a legitimate concern, the critical question is: what is the price of a university’s values? If the moral and ethical values of donors do not align with the values of the university, demanding that the university complies with their beliefs, it poses a serious threat to institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It is deeply concerning how accepted the choice of silencing has become in the face of a loss of funding. This is not an abstraction, as we have in recent months witnessed how power and the powerful have bullied universities across the world, including in South Africa.

The case of Gaza will have special resonance when history is written about our period. It will be described as the most televised genocide in human history, with active complicity by major Western powers, consent manufactured by the media, and a situation where perpetrators are cast as victims and victims as deserving of death. Academics too will be held to account. Nowhere in history was there such a perversion of reality – Baudrillard’s hyper-reality played out in real time. We actually agree with Professor Chetty that we need to constantly think about what our key decisions mean for the future, but for a different reason. Future generations will judge our institutions for their silence when people are being murdered in their tens of thousands in real time.

Declarations

Our views are our own and do not necessarily represent the views of our institutions or member organisations. We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. Both authors read and approved the final version.

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