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Sociology cannot be neutral when genocide stares us in the face

By Ahmad Murad Merican · March 25, 2025 @ 11:36pm



Two elderly men walk while pushing bicycles as a cloud of smoke erupts from Israeli bombardment on the northern Gaza Strip, in Beit Lahia on Tuesday (March 25). — AFP

SOCIOLOGISTS, historians, scientists and scholars and journalists cannot be neutral in the name of separating facts from values in the face of evil. Neutrality is not an option.

There is concern on the role of sociology as a discipline in confronting power and inequality, and decolonisation. It faltered in the colonial violence and genocide in Gaza.

There is a complicity of silence of the universities, including Malaysian institutions. Palestine is a civilisation, and a sociological issue. The genocide in Gaza demands a critical reckoning of the role of sociology as a discipline and the broader purpose of academic institutions.

"What kind of knowledge does the discipline produce, and to whose benefit?" asks Rafeef Ziadah from King's College, London.

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Sociology (as well as other disciplines in the social sciences) has long grappled with the ways systems of domination and resistance intersect.

The Palestinian experience is a profound example of how colonial histories and contemporary geopolitics interact to produce enduring social injustice. This is a "moment for sociology".



Contributing to the *Special Section on Palestine: A Sociological Issue in the Sociological Review* Vol. 73 (2) 2025), Ziadah calls for our commitment to decolonisation.

And this is material, not only symbolic. It is not limited to curricula. In this regard, there must be a re-evaluation of the social sciences as a whole.

We hear the silence of the academic disciplines, hiding in the comfort of lecture halls and the pages of academic papers, under the guise of objectivity and neutrality while genocide stares us in the face.

It is business as usual for sociology, communication and media departments, for example, on media complicity in genocide, on the (Western) media and journalists as war-mongers and killing machines.

Is silence of the academic disciplines an option in real-time savagery? If sociology is silent and neutral, upholding the "shattered" canon of "Reason and Rationality", then it reflects the alignment with hegemony and domination; and settler-colonial logics that erase Palestinian lives and struggles while masking complicity under the guise of institutional detachment.

Palestinian scholar Edward W. Said's 1984 article titled *Permission to Narrate*, published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, presciently warned of this danger, describing a "disciplinary communication apparatus" that suppresses critiques of Israel and silences dissenting voices.

It is the responsibility of academic fields like sociology and communication to emphasise the need to tell the Palestinian story lest it disappears entirely from public consciousness.

We have seen symbolic dissent and political advocacy. It has to be urgently realised that neutrality (and objectivity) is not an impartial or universal stance but an epistemological and strategic construct that operates within the broader liberal frameworks of recognition and representation, ultimately reinforcing existing power structures.

Neutrality serves to perpetuate settler colonialism "by compelling indigenous peoples to seek validation within structures that are inherently designed to sustain their dispossession".

We are reminded of the conventional notion of a university — in that of insulating itself from moral accountability — hence implicitly endorsing conventions and the social order; and in this case, the colonial order.

Hence, sociology's claim to neutrality is not only a breach of the norm in the body of knowledge production but an active affirmation of the beliefs and ideologies that enable such settler-colonial violence and genocide.

Sociology has long reflected the power dynamics and geopolitical alignments shaping institutional, national and global priorities. Neutrality is a political choice. Theory is not an abstract concept.

Sociology (and related Social Sciences disciplines) are not passive nor apolitical. They are active agents. Sociology is seen as threatening if and when it challenges dominant narratives. The disciplines must make a distinction between competing opinions and systemic oppression.

Hence, sociology as a discipline must confront its role in perpetuating the very structures it seeks to critique, refusing to remain detached or merely descriptive in its approach.

Ziadah calls for a radical thinking of methods and priorities. Neutrality is not apolitical.

In this case it is a mechanism that perpetuates colonial violence and shields institutions from accountability. In fact, mainstream sociology has led to savagery by dampening the spirit of modern civilisation.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Straits Times

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