

Universities as arenas of conflict: possibilities and conditions of dialogue

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As introduction, brief reference to the cooperation of Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan, the schoolbook “Learning Each Other’s Historical Narrative”, also published in “Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine” (2012).

Universities can be an ideal place for the discovery of different views and different styles of life. Encountering others can provide and create a *mental space* of listening and exchange, finding transversal and divergent perspectives.

By mental space I refer to what enables and furthers “mental acts of exploration, comparison and imagination” (Schütze/Schröder-Wildhagen 2012:261) that become biographically significant towards accepting difference and otherness, as well as recognizing common obligations and principles. Dialogue constitutes mental space.

Arguably, this can be seen as a core value of institutions of higher learning in democratic societies, with younger and older adults coming from different backgrounds, meeting on campus and in classrooms to discover and exchange ideas, opinions, experiences. This can significantly matter for their involvement in society and their political participation. The conditions for mental space, however, need to be defended and actively sustained. Universities can be under pressure, and conflicts are not unusual.

We know from Nazi Germany that universities can be among the first institutions to succumb to authoritarian state rule and play along. At present in Germany, political pressure is exerted from right-wing actors. Within the institution, highly conflictual situations occurred at universities in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the war in Gaza, which only recently came to a precarious halt. These events and the terrible suffering inflicted on both sides has evoked strong partisan views among students and staff at universities all over the world.

Student protest and the occupation of university buildings have sometimes been ended by presidents calling the police. Or legal action might follow (as presently at Goldsmiths) in case it is

recognized that the rights of one of the sides in a campus conflict have not been safeguarded by the university.

But other than calling on the police or the courts, universities can actively contribute towards facilitating exchange in situations of conflict. If things go well, this would support democratic participation, but it requires ongoing dialogue. I am going to focus on a case which is rather exceptional in the way dialogue was kept going during conflict, even under pressure from different sides to obstruct and put an end to these efforts. A process-oriented analysis of this case could show us more about the specific conditions and action that preceded the continuation of dialogue even under mounting pressure, and how different actors were involved in keeping dialogue going. I can only highlight some of the aspects of this process.

Since we are dealing with public events, I do not have to anonymize the institution of higher learning, which is Alice-Salomon-Hochschule in Berlin, or ASH Berlin.

As to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself, I very much recommend José Brunner's book "Brutale Nachbarn", for its very circumspect approach, in historical, political, and psychosocial terms:

My focus here is on the specific conflicts that arose at ASH Berlin in this context, as an example of how it can become possible to initiate dialogue and to keep it going under high pressure, so I will briefly tell the story of what happened. At the beginning of January 2025, about 60 students occupied the main auditorium at ASH Berlin to protest against the war in Gaza and to show their solidarity with the Palestinian population. They also painted slogans – some of them legally sanctioned – and distributed leaflets in the building.

Videos circulated showing the occupation and the president of the university, Bettina Völter, asking the police to leave when they arrived in the evening. This was condemned by newspaper commentators, and there was political pressure on her to resign as president.

In an interview with a SPIEGEL journalist on January 26, Bettina Völter explained why she would not resign, by defending the autonomy of universities and by enabling educational processes. She and other colleagues met the protesting students and listened to them, also questioned their slogans. She explained how this practice corresponds to what is being taught at this university in the social professions, namely, building relationships and enabling dialogue. In retrospect, listening and

understanding had made it possible to discuss antisemitism and antimuslim racism at the university, and not focus on a possible police intervention ending the protest.

Asked about the students' slogans praising terror that circulated in the media, Bettina Völter replied that in fact she had reported these slogans to the police, and that there had been a rather small number of such leaflets, but that was what the social and news media had focused on. She further replied that while the protests were about the war in Gaza, what she understood from listening to the students was that they were also protesting antimuslim racism, and of not being seen and heard with their own concerns.

As to her communication of the events to the news media, she differentiated between clearly communicating within the university from talking about the events in more general terms to the outside. The video in which she had asked the police to leave had been taken out of context: earlier that day, the protesting students had told her and the vice presidents that they wanted to stay overnight in the main auditorium and occupy it for a couple of days. She and the vice presidents explained to them why this was not possible and that they would have to leave by the evening, which they eventually accepted. As they were about to leave the building, journalists were waiting downstairs at the main entrance, so the president looked outside to see if she could guide the students to a side exit; there, however, the police had started to take position. To avoid an escalation, she asked the police to leave at that side exit.

Asked about the reproach that incriminating leaflets and posters had been removed before journalists could gain access to the building that evening, she responded that these materials had been secured in her office, to document them; she then reported four kinds of offensive materials to the police. She explains how this was a different approach from another university in Berlin, where the president had let in the journalists to show them the damages to university buildings and offensive slogans left by the protesters.

As to the future, Bettina Völter concludes:

"The university must be a safe place for everyone, including on social media platforms used by its members. Any glorification of violence and rhetoric of destruction, any form of discrimination, anti-Semitism, and racism, as well as inhumane and aggressive behavior and any symbolic transgressions such as covering the bust (i.e., of Alice Salomon), are unacceptable. The art is to make this clear and still be able to talk about everything in terms of its expression, motivation, and effect, and to gain insight from this."

I have quoted from this interview in detail because we can see the different kinds of work – for example, mediating, or liaison work – that are necessary to create conditions of dialogue, as well as towards securing and defending the university as a social arena, with its prospective mental space.

In terms of a conclusion, I would like to sum up how the events at ASH Berlin unfolded in the course of this year, based on several conversations with Bettina Völter.

She said that the first half year after the short occupation in January was very stressful. Different groups among students and staff voiced their protest about the way she and the vice presidents had handled the conflict. Others retreated into silence. While the news media eventually went on to other topics, political pressure from the Senate continued. But they also received support from there and from others.

They and two professors as well as representatives from the students' parliament continued to meet and talk with the protesting students, and the different groups they associated in. Not all agreed to enter or stay in dialogue, but they had learned about their different concerns and Bettina Völter thinks that at least some of them experienced that insight can be gained through talking with one another. Same applies to the professors. The President invited all of them to talk with her in small groups, more than half agreed to meet and to discuss what academic responsibility means. She did not distribute her minutes of these talks as results, but rather invited further discussion about them. Alliances were created by professors. The dialogical approach was important in response to distrust and suspicion that only some groups of students and staff were included versus others. By continuously offering dialogue about the process, towards shaping the university as organization trust was found, even though, again, not everyone wanted to participate in dialogue.

Seminars and lecture series were organized that addressed issues concerning discrimination and involvement in civil society. It was agreed that lectures should be in English because of many international students at the university and the key note speakers themselves.

Positions for contact persons were created for students who had experienced racism and antisemitism. I think it is very important that the person who took this position takes a mediating stance, focusing on anti-Semitism, migration and racism, queer-feminist perspectives, resilience and peace work. Vered Berman is also an activist in

פורום המשפחות השכולות הישראלי-[The Parents Circle-Families Forum \(PCFF; Hebrew: פורום המשפחות השכולות הישראלי-\)](#) (العائلات الثكلى الإسرائيلي الفلسطيني: [Arabic: PCFF; Hebrew: פורום המשפחות השכולות הישראלי- פלسطيني](#)) is a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost immediate family members due to the conflict. The PCFF operates under the principle that a process of reconciliation is a prerequisite for achieving a sustained peace. The PCFF is also known as **Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families for Reconciliation and Peace** and as **Bereaved Families Supporting Peace, Reconciliation, and Tolerance**.

PCFF was funded in 1995, and is the support organization founded in Germany since more recently. Vered Berman describes her work as following: "I am committed to a discrimination-critical, dialogue-oriented and de-polarizing debate on anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim racism and Israel/Palestine".

The ***anti-polarizing approach is understood as supportive of democracy***. It is shared among professors whose research and teaching focuses on post-colonial issues, as well as on awareness of the holocaust. Beyond the conflict in Israel/Palestine, pressing issues are addressed surrounding the social and academic responsibility of universities, freedom of speech and social transformation, focusing on the case of Turkey and Serbia. And, of course, against mounting political pressure exerted from right-wing actors, the university takes part in a Germany-wide campaign "Universities take a stand".

UNIVERSITY LIFE [ASH Berlin takes part in nationwide campaign "Universities take a stand"](#)

The anti-discrimination commission conceptualized core values for the university, which were approved by the senate.

Of course, controversies remain, and there are ups and downs in the process of intra-university dialogue. But more students and staff than before participate, and there is less distrust.