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Sociology in the Times of Genocide

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The pages of *The Sociological Review* journal contain sociological engagement with a range of issues on everyday life and social worlds, all connected by the same disciplinary commitment, expressed in the Sociological Review Foundation's manifesto¹: to work towards social justice and "the future we wish to see". Genocide is an urgent sociological issue, involving the destruction of everyday life and social worlds, defined by the Genocide Convention as acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. Some scholars describe genocide as a "crime of social classification", revealing a range of sociological questions, such as the production of group categories, the role of state power in the organisation of violence, and the conditions under which destruction and dehumanisation become thinkable and actionable (Luft, 2023; Shaw, 2012; Weber, 1918). As Sociologists for Palestine (S4P) note in this issue, genocide itself is not new, and universities have historically acted both as space complicit in war, colonisation and genocide as well as spaces of resistance to it. We are, however, at a new juncture as campuses become the leading site of global protest against genocide, with 174 student encampments reported around the world², and a battleground of repression, with heavy, often violent, policing, and ongoing retaliation against protesters³. Despite all of this, there has been relative silence within Sociology departments, professional bodies and associations. This special issue is a reckoning for what the role of sociology is - in terms of theory, analysis and praxis. Faced with mass scale genocidal violence and destruction, many of us are questioning how we can mobilise our sociological imaginations and what the role of sociological praxis is

¹ <https://thesociologicalreview.org/the-sociological-review-foundation/our-manifesto/>

² <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/highereducation/2024/08/08/a-re-education-student-reflections-on-campus-protests/>

³ In Britain, Liberty report at least 28 universities launched disciplinary investigations against students and staff in connection with their Palestine activism since October 2023 and as many as 113 staff and students have faced disciplinary action, <https://libertyinvestigates.org.uk/articles/revealed-the-worsening-crackdown-on-pro-palestinian-activism-at-uk-universities/>

to, in the words of the Sociological Review Foundation's manifesto, "envision radical alternatives". As this collection demonstrates, there is a desire to confront the limits and the potential that our discipline offers in the times of genocide, including: the role of sociological theory and its tensions with practice; how to confront conservatism and complicity in sociological departments and professional associations; and how to utilise the tools of sociology for liberation.

To enable this discussion, we put out a call for papers to engage with the genocide in Gaza and other places similarly experiencing war and genocide to examine how we can learn through them to challenge injustice and take steps towards alternative futures. The response to that call was immense. Inevitably, the majority of the submissions related to the genocide in Gaza. We were struck by the number of papers from scholars, especially students and early career scholars experiencing oppression and retaliation at their universities and who were turning to the special issue to find solace, solidarity and a safe place to speak. However, Israel's genocide in Gaza has elevated significance for range of broader historical and political reasons. As early as October 13, 2023, leading genocide scholars have analysed Israel's conduct in Gaza as a textbook case of genocide. The blatant and explicit articulation of the desire to destroy Gaza and its population as a whole as a response to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, distinguishes this genocide from the majority of other genocides, in which perpetrators usually don't express their intention so openly (Segal, 2023). The use of language by Israeli politicians and the military not only openly and violently dehumanised Palestinians but also used a widely available reservoir of racist language to do so. In his moving piece "A Scream for Gaza," Nabil Echchaibi draws out the transnational and historical scale of such racist dehumanising language: "My scream . . . hugs the Palestinian under and above the rubble and embraces the Jew who looks in utter horror as those who were dehumanised and exterminated as 'rats' yesterday bomb and annihilate others as 'human animals' today" (Echchaibi, 2024, p. 1023). Indeed, Israel's genocide not only reveals the universal language of racialisation, dehumanisation, and hierarchy on which modernity and social theory were built (Bhambra, 2007; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Go, 2016) but also the limits of how well sociology and other scholarly disciplines can linguistically and analytically capture such violence (Gunaratnam, 2025; Jung, 2019; Salamanca et al., 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2024). The genocide in Gaza, in that sense, stands in for our global past and future. As Baconi (2024) writes, Gaza is "the abject of our time," a place that signifies for Israel and the West the threat of terrorism, barbarism, backwardness, and racialised overpopulation. Gaza offers a "blueprint" for how settler colonies (and nation-states writ large) can become liberal democracies despite being founded upon the dispossession, disenfranchisement, occupation, and extermination of others (Baconi, 2024). Given the long history of Israeli settler colonisation and violence (Khalidi, 2020), this transnational perspective on Palestine has existed long before the current genocide (see Frey and Rogaly in this collection. As Alex Lubin (2014) attests, the violence of the 20th century positioned Palestinians, Black Americans, and Jews in the diaspora as the ultimate Other vis-à-vis modernity and its central institution, the nation-state. A shared understanding of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy as global phenomena is key to these "geographies of liberation," and continues to shape 21st century shared struggle (Clarno, 2017; Davis, 2016; Erakat, 2020; Erakat & Hill, 2019; Hill, 2018; Kelley, 2019; Naber, 2017; Salih et al., 2020).

While the role of the discipline in confronting, naming and analysing the genocide in Gaza has become vital in the current conjuncture, we have found many of the theoretical tools and concepts that sociologists have used for many years in scholarship on race(ism), colonialism, and power, increasingly vulnerable to critique. The wider context of a culture 'war on woke' seeks to carve a clear line of separation between the 'academy' and 'social justice' efforts. A recent example of this is, for instance, the American Sociological Association leadership's decision to block a member-initiated vote on BDS, despite it meeting the formal threshold to be considered (see Sociologists for Palestine paper in this collection and [S4P website](#)). On the one hand, these arguments reinforce the walls of the Ivory Tower and limit the capacity of the university to serve as a public good. On the other, they promote a climate that demonises the very scholarship that can help reveal, rather than conceal, the racist and imperial global structures which provide the very groundwork for genocide, like we have witnessed in Gaza, to occur. Far from peripheral, the backlash against social justice-oriented scholarship in the academy, and specifically in the arts and social sciences, has found a welcome home within public debates about race, inequality and identity in Britain. Indeed, the very concepts used to identify oppression and injustice, are increasingly being weaponised and reconfigured by bad faith actors. In Britain, for instance, the popular support for the people of Palestine has been articulated through repeated street protests advocating for ceasefires. These demonstrations have increasingly been positioned at the sharp end of critique. In October 2023, then Home secretary, Suella Braverman, was quick to brandish the demonstrations as 'hate marches.' By 2024, a racially minoritized woman was accused of a racially aggravated public order offence after daring to critique the British foreign policy approach to the genocide using a satirical image depicting Rishi Sunak, and others, as coconuts on a protest placard during a demonstration (see Malik, 2024). By 2026, the protests have become a useful scapegoat and catalyst in the ascendancy of far-right political expression and street protests which seeks to table its own claims of marginalisation and alienation, but as native whites, in a country of strangers. These developments remind us that we cannot take for granted all the sociological tools at our disposal and they provide an opportunity for the discipline to reimagine its role in the world in the context of brutal wars and genocide.

Sociology, Genocide & Palestine

As sociologists, we need to put our politically committed, theoretically grounded, historically informed tools of comparative analysis to work to situate Palestine and Israel's genocide in Gaza within historical, global structures of empire, colonialism, and racial hierarchy and as central to the world we currently live in (Burawoy, 2025; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2024b and see Taha in this collection). First, tools of sociological analysis are crucial to unpacking the dynamics of settler colonialism that have shaped the formation of the Israeli state and its ongoing control over all of historic Palestine. Shaped by crucial work in Palestine studies (Bhandar & Ziadah, 2016; Sayegh, 2012), sociological scholarship on settler colonialism offers insight into the political economy of land dispossession, occupation, and expulsion, the formation of hegemonic memory, and the legitimisation of various forms of settler colonial violence (Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2025; Tatour, 2019). It also connects the racialisation of Palestine and the Palestinians to broader circuits of race-making and shared interests between Israel, the US, and other states (Abdo, 2022; Goldberg, 2009; Rexer, 2024; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2016; Tatour & Lentin, 2025). As such, sociological work on Palestine and the genocide is key to understanding Israel's historical and contemporary politics and

settler colonial ambitions, and how they affect not only Palestinians, but also Iranians, Lebanese, and Syrian people (see Sukarieh in this collection). Sociological analyses of Palestine also intervene in broader social debates. In particular, they provide an important counterpoint to hegemonic Western discourse that mobilises shallow and ahistorical readings of the settler colonial framework and liken it to a mere moral standpoint or to antisemitism (Levenson, 2026).

Second, sociological analysis has also drawn out the multiple social intersections and consequences of genocide. Such work includes theoretical questions on the genocide and our discipline (Burawoy, 2025; Gunaratnam, 2025; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2024b), genocide and space (Ajour, 2025), genocide, gender, and reproduction (Gowayed, 2024; Rexer, 2026a; Rudrappa, 2024; Shoman, 2025; Sirriyeh, 2024; Taha, 2025 and Shoman in this collection), genocide and health/the healthcare system (Majadle, 2025; Tanous et al., 2026), and genocide and the educational system (Abbas, 2024; Ziadah, 2025 and see S4P and Fernandez and Tufail in this collection).

Finally, a third key dimension involves a reckoning with methodological questions in working on the genocide and on Palestine more broadly. These include questions about how Palestine is being taught in the classroom, including the politics of representation and narrative hegemony (Rexer, 2026; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2021; Weiner, 2023) or how to do de- or anti-colonial research on Palestine and with Palestinians (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2018; Al-Hardan, 2014; Kelly, 2020) (see Sukarieh in this collection). Such works underpins a more recent turn in sociology to treat anti-colonial thought as social theory, not only for political reasons, but because anticolonialism produces new social critiques, analyses, and a critical vocabulary, all central for understanding how empire, colonialism, and racial hierarchy continue to structure the world (Ahmad, 2023; Al-Hardan & Go, 2025; Hammer, 2020; Meghji, 2021, 2024; Niang, 2024).

Theory, Pedagogy, and Praxis: Contributions to the Special Issue

The articles in this special section build upon and extend the sociological analysis of genocide. They confront sociology's capacity to respond to these times of genocide through critical pedagogy, theory, analysis, and praxis. Articles in this collection demonstrate the potential of sociological theory and analysis to respond to and contextualise ongoing genocidal violence. Contributors to this collection both affirm sociological analysis but also challenge and unsettle the canon of social theory and taken-for-granted frameworks, such as international law (Eghbariah, 2024, see Taha, this collection) or hegemonic forms of memory politics (Bashir & Goldberg, 2018, see Frey and Rogaly, this collection). In so doing, they demonstrate the strength of an anti-colonial, historical, comparative, and transnational sociology, one that, following Said (1979) approaches Zionism from the standpoint of its victims. Hala Shoman provides a powerful account of the devastating impact of the ongoing genocide on community-led anti-family-violence (FV) interventions in Gaza. Shoman was undertaking fieldwork on growing networks of anti-FV activism and community education when the genocide began. Using a chronopolitical framework, Shoman confronts the impact of genocide in this context, arguing that settler-colonial violence governs through time by interrupting social repair and foreclosing already-emerging futures. Bridging feminist theory with Anziska's (2018) concept of "prevention", Shoman shows how entire social trajectories in Gaza are obstructed and reconceptualises Israeli settler-colonial and patriarchal violence as mutually constitutive,

demonstrating how colonial power structures and intensifies gendered harm. Integrating Palestinian, decolonial, and intersectional feminism, the article introduces “prevented worlds” to capture the violent interruption of feminist and community-led futures. In *Exiting Law, Entering Revolution*, Taha reflects upon the limits of international law in the context of Palestinian resistance at a moment when legal frameworks are increasingly reified by both states and scholars. This paper instead offers a critical engagement with forms of resistance that lie beyond the bounds of legality. Taha makes a compelling case for a more critical sociological reading which blends Marxist legal theory, anti-colonial thought, and contemporary analyses of Palestinian resistance, centring revolutionary praxis through figures such as Basel al-Araj and George Habash. In their article, S4P utilise settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and militarism as central frameworks to interpret Israeli violence in Gaza and broader geopolitical dynamics. Significantly, they theorise universities and sociology embedded within these structures, historically complicit rather than neutral institutions, while offering pathways towards ‘*decommodification, decolonization, and indigenization of higher education*’. Frey and Rogaly’s paper reflecting on collective album project *Lider mit Palestine* (Yiddish Songs with Palestine), comprising newly composed Yiddish songs responding to the unfolding genocide in Gaza, draw from Rothberg’s (2009) concept of multidirectional memory as a connective framework to show how historical memory can be mobilised in relational ways to foster solidarity and political connection with Palestinian experiences of dispossession and violence.

The articles also explore the theme of teaching, activism and organising. Rana Sukarieh reflects on teaching the sociology of colonialism, settler colonialism and anti-colonialism in within a live situated war and genocide. Teaching a class on Imperialism, Colonialization and Anti-Colonisation in Beirut during Israel’s genocide in Gaza and war on Lebanon saw theories of violence discussed in the classroom turn into real violence, as one student accounts: “The violence we studied and analysed was no longer confined to words in books; it is around us; it is here. This is no longer history; this is now”. Through a series of teaching reflections and extracts from students’ coursework on the lived realities of colonialism and violence, Sukarieh offers reflection on building an anti-colonial pedagogy and spaces of solidarity through teaching. Articles by S4P and Fernandez and Tufail widen the scope from classroom to campus. S4P lays out the power of organising as sociologists and in and against sociological institutions to challenge US universities’ ongoing histories of militarism, settler colonialism, and racism. They provide an account the work needed to build a broad-based movement to demand that academic institutions and professional associations enact the ethical principles at the heart of Sociology. The article outlines the works of S4P’s Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction (BDS) campaign in relation to the American Sociological Association, offering practical organising insight on building such a campaign. They offer 4-fold recommendations for sociologists to collectively organise to ‘both push and defend our institutions’ in the times of genocide. In Fernandez and Tufail’s reflections on the UK university encampments, they argue that the backlash against student protesters should be read through the lens of the ‘enduring logics of the War on Terror’, which has pathologised Muslim political expression for decades in the British context. They argue that the heightened surveillance of Muslim communities that has long been present in counter-terror legislation like the Prevent Duty, provided the necessary infrastructure within universities, both practically and ideologically, to crack down on protests. The article helps us to understand how contemporary representations

of Muslim solidarity with Palestine have become legible in the public imagination as sympathy for terrorism, when Muslims have historically been racialised through a lens of terror.

A further crosscutting theme in this collection is transnational solidarity with Palestine – both before and during the genocide in Gaza. Following Lubin, (2014), legal scholar and activist Noura Erakat (2020) describes how transnational forms of solidarity, for Palestine, but also among variously racialised groups and Palestinians, cannot be assumed through identity categories, but are shaped by what she terms a “structure of intimacy,” nurtured by feelings of political kinship and comradeship. Unlike transactional relationships, she writes that “such kinship is upheld by a common repertoire of mutually reinforcing deeds and gestures based on the visceral knowledge that the relationship exceeds political conditions and is the source of survival in the plural ‘we’” (Erakat, 2020, p. 479). This “we” is probed, challenged, and strengthened across various articles. Frey and Rogaly’s work is a testimony to understanding transnational solidarity by showing how diasporic cultural practices - specifically Yiddish song - can actively produce and sustain solidarity. For instance, they illustrate how a partisan song written in the Nazi Ghetto in Vilnius in 1943 allows performers today to create multidirectional connections between the Nazi genocide and the genocide in Gaza. Overall, foregrounding modes of solidarity based on an understanding of shared humanity, they argue that “opposition to genocide must be grounded in universal human dignity rather than through solidarity to one particular ethnic group alone.” Similarly, in their piece and following Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), Fernandez and Tufail situate the university as a space of promise and opportunity, in which students will encounter, learn, and organise with others they might have otherwise never met. S4P also foreground the long history of coalitional politics of student organising in their contribution. They ground the 2023 and 2024 students for Palestine encampments in the US in a longer history of coalitional work against various American wars from the 1960s through the 1980s, and illustrate how existing organisational structures, including by Jewish student organisations, were instrumental for building a broad coalition in response to Israel’s genocide. Notably, the central role Jewish organisers have played across encampments in the US and the UK has often been ignored by mainstream media.

And finally, at a more practical level, S4P’s paper ends with a call to sociologists across the world to join in the global BDS movement and list recommendations for action, points we too would like to end on. S4P note: ‘Other sociological organisations such as the British Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, and the Sociological Review Foundation could likewise adopt and abide by the principles of BDS’. This call is supported in Britain, reflected in the recent work by British-based group Sociologists in Solidarity with Palestinians (SISP). SISP⁴ have called upon the British Sociological Association (BSA) to act. SISP’s demands include for the BSA to support an academic boycott and divestment as developed by the BDS⁵ as expanded in the PACBI⁶ (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) principles, which include urging international academic associations and publishers, including Sage, to sever ties with complicit

⁴ See their full statement here <https://socispal.wordpress.com/sisp-statements>

⁵ The BDS movement has made clear it ‘targets complicity, not identity.’ Practically, non-complicity has been described as: ‘Not being implicated in Israel’s military occupation, apartheid, or settler colonialism; and ‘Publicly recognizing Palestinian rights under international law, primarily the right of refugees to return in accordance with UN resolution 194.’

⁶ Following PACBI principles, this is an institutional rather than individual boycott.

Israeli institutions such as the MALMAD consortium; to review all investments; to partner with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza⁷; and to develop and fund a BSA virtual fellowships for Palestinian sociologists in Gaza. These actions have a broad base of support amongst BSA members, speaking to a desire for the BSA to play a leading role against genocide and settler colonialism and in demonstrating concrete solidarity with Palestinians. As this collection demonstrates, in times of genocide, which our institutions are complicit in supporting, sociologists have both meaningful tools and an urgent responsibility to act. As a discipline dedicated to studying social structures and categories, subjectivities, and inequalities, centering Palestine during a time of genocide has practical, pedagogical, and theoretical implications. As this collection illustrates, they can take various shapes and forms, from supporting the BDS movement and striving towards institutional change, to centering Palestine and Israeli settler colonialism in our teaching of historical, transnational and comparative sociology, race, gender, and class, to forging coalitions within and beyond the discipline. Solidarity is not a given but a condition we must work towards, as it requires a reckoning with the long histories of the present, including how racism, anti-semitism, and colonialism shape the world we live in. The responsibility lies with us to put these commitments into practice.

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⁷ See here <https://www.gazauniversities.org/>

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