

PhD dissertation: The battle over the Israel-Palestine conflict

A study of international political anomie

Anja Sletteland

Department of Sociology and Human Geography

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Oslo

Submitted: March 7, 2015

In recent years, the clashing Israeli and Palestinian narratives of the conflict have increasingly become acknowledged as an obstacle to peace. Whereas Palestinians interpret the conflict in terms of historic justice and inalienable rights, Israelis regard it as a matter of recognition and long-term security for the Jewish state. The clashing narratives reinforce the hostility between the two sides, and mediators describe it as a barrier to finding common ground in negotiations. In this dissertation, Anja Sletteland examines why clashing narratives has such a deteriorating impact on the Israel-Palestine conflict. She argues that the intractability of the discourse is not limited to the dialogue between the parties, but rather a defining characteristic of the discursive struggle over this conflict worldwide. Moreover, diverging worldviews are a common aspect of territorial conflicts, without necessarily making them intractable. Sletteland argues that the inability to communicate and cooperate across diverging discourses is not caused by clashing narratives as such, but the fact that they produce competing interpretations of *norms and rules*. Shared norms are a precondition for political interaction, as they enable people to resolve shared problems in spite of competing interests and ideologies.

Based on an extensive empirical study of the battle over the conflict, the dissertation argues that unstable norms of conflict resolution – not only between the parties, but also in the international community – contribute to making the Israel-Palestine conflict intractable. To explain this condition, the dissertation develops a new theory of *political anomie*. “Anomie” refers to a breakdown or lack of norms, here understood as customary expectations that coordinate interaction with others. Sletteland’s theory of political anomie builds on Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton’s concepts of *anomie*, which over the last century have been central theories for explaining fallouts between an individual and the society. However, Sletteland’s theory of political anomie relates to norms and rules that exist and become destabilized *relationally* between political actors. Political anomie involves a fundamental lack of consensus on the rules of the game, from what political system is authoritative, to what conceptions of justice apply and what communicative and behavioral norms are at play. Sletteland identifies norm structures that shape political interaction, which she theorizes as discursive, institutional and structural anomie, and advances an approach to examining how they can become destabilized.

The dissertation examines sources of the diverging norms pertaining to the Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as how they manifest themselves in Israeli, Palestinian, American and international discourses on the topic. The dissertation builds on two empirical studies. The first focuses primarily on the battle over the Israel-Palestine conflict that takes place in the United States, because a key tenet of U.S. policy on the conflict is to control the terms of

conflict resolution. Sletteland has conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork among American advocacy groups, policy makers, opinion leaders and experts on the conflict, and mapped the interaction between competing discourses. The second study is a discourse analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations in 2013-2014, and builds on official sources and media reports. On the basis of these two studies, Sletteland develops a grounded theory of political anomie, which she further advances into a general theory in dialogue with related political theories.

The dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

- 1. What characterizes the condition of political anomie?*
- 2. What causes political anomie in the battle over the Israel-Palestine conflict, and how does it manifest itself in the discourse?*

The first part of the dissertation, the “kappe” or introductory paper, develops the theory of political anomie and examines the characteristics of this condition. It also discusses the research design of the study, introduces the articles and concludes with a discussion of its implications for policy and further research. The second part comprises three articles that examine different ways in which political anomie emerges in, and influences, the battle over the Israel-Palestine conflict:

- 1. When the map distorts the landscape: The American discourse on the Israel-Palestine conflict*
- 2. The American Discourse on Israeli Apartheid: Bridging Practical and Popular Geopolitics*
- 3. Political anomie in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process*

Each article is currently under review for publication in international journals.