



**INTERNATIONAL LAW
AND EMOTIONS:
RECOVERING UNIVERSALITY?
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MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
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International Law and Emotions: Recovering Universality?

Conference, 25th - 27th February 2026

Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, Heidelberg

The current international order is in turmoil. Resistance to breaches of international law is weak, not least because of widespread contempt for this law. At the same time, political actors increasingly instrumentalise emotions while attacking international norms and institutions. This dynamic particularly undermines international law's aspiration to be not only globally applicable but also genuinely *universal* in the sense of being shared across populations.

Against this backdrop, the MPIL conference "International Law and Emotions: Recovering Universality?" explored how, whose, and which emotions contribute to the erosion—or possible renewal—of the effectiveness, legitimacy, and universality of international law. It brought together scholars from law, psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, literature, and computational linguistics.

The project seeks to develop "International Law and Emotions" as a new research field. We understand international law as a law in *e-motion*: a legal system and discipline oscillating between the fears of "coexistence", the hopes of "cooperation", and a "sense of belonging" in a global society. Selected papers from the conference will be published in an edited volume.

Convened by: Anne Peters, Elia Alexiou, Bernadette Lumbela, Caroline Schaeffer

Speakers: Tilmann Altwicker, Elif Askin, Jonas Bens, Tomer Broude, Emiliano Buis, Kiana Daryabeigi, Christoph Engel, Seda Gürkan, Moshe Hirsch, Bradley Irish, Emily Kidd White, Matthias Mahlmann, Terry Maroney, Alexander Mehler, Tatjana Papić, Valérie Rosoux, Anna Spain Bradley, Nanying Tao, Erik Tuchtfield, Joshua Uyheng, Anne van Aaken, Arno Villringer, and Kelebogile Zvobgo.

Engaged listeners: Abhipsa Upasana Dash, Otgontuya Davaanyam, Louis Guibault, Alexander Koehler, Rebecca Militz, Simone Mitchell-DaCosta, Maria Ossio, Oriola Oyewole, Thivanka Ratnayake, Johanna Ritter, Lauren Rogers, Phyllis Schöttler, Alik Semertzi, Zubaidiya Simayi, Betül Simsek, Ambre Tissot, Meng Wang, and Kateryna Zakharova.

Organisation: Anette Kreutzfeld

Funded by: Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the German Research Foundation (DFG).

For more information please visit the [conference website](#).

Conference Report

by Erik Tuchtfeld, Berlin

From Wednesday 25th to Friday 27th February 2026, scholars from law, psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, literature, and computational linguistics convened at the Max Planck Institute in Heidelberg (MPIIL) to develop “International Law and Emotions” as a new research field. Convened by Prof. **Anne Peters**, Dr. **Elia Alexiou**, **Bernadette Lumbela** and **Caroline Schaeffer**, the participants explored how, whose, and which emotions contribute to the erosion – or possible renewal – of international law’s effectiveness and credibility. Across all sessions, one assumption emerged:

emotions are not noise at the margins of international law, but built into the way it operates and imagines universality.

The Emotive Judge

The conference opened on Wednesday evening with a public keynote by Prof. **Terry Maroney** of Vanderbilt University at the German American Institute in Heidelberg (DAI). In her talk titled “What Judges Feel: Insights on Judicial Emotion” she argued that emotions are not the enemy of reason but its essential companion, and that judicial anger and moral outrage can be core competences for recognising injustice. Judges experience irritation, joy, fear and loneliness as part of their decision-making, especially in high-stakes international cases.

She emphasised that these emotions are constructed experiences, shaped by context, culture and the body, and that the long-standing script of judicial dispassion forces judges into a structural paradox. These insights laid the groundwork for the following two days and framed a central tension: if international law is inherently emotional, how openly should the profession acknowledge and study that fact?

Earlier that day, an **Engaged Listeners’ Workshop** had already set the tone for this inquiry. Early career researchers examined how cultural emotions, linguistic nuance, and political hierarchies shape legal concepts and experiences of harm, and how narratives of othering, belonging and uncertainty influence international law’s claim to universality.



Identifying and Measuring Emotions

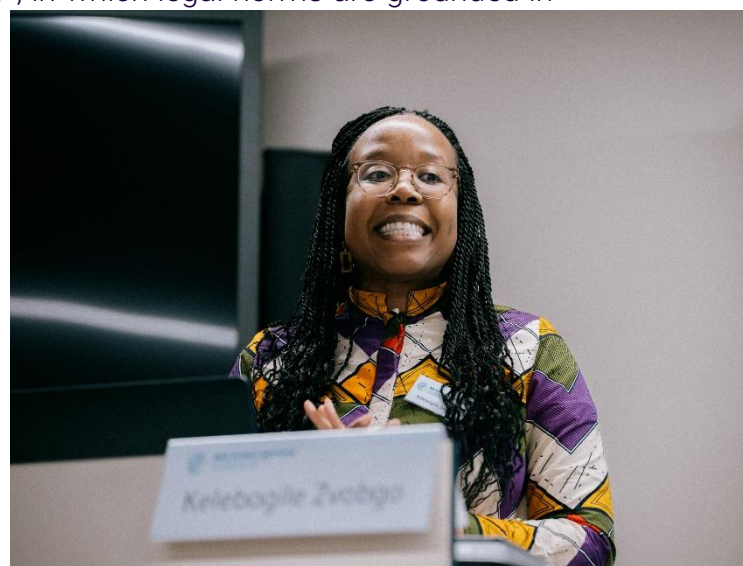
On Thursday morning Prof. **Anne Peters** opened the conference, followed by a recap of the pre-conference Engaged Listeners' Workshop, where early career researchers presented on the themes of "Emotions in Context: Culture, Law, and Language", "The Emotional Experience of Harm in Human Rights Law and Jurisprudence", and "Universality in International Law between Uncertainty and Belonging". After this, the first session, "Towards Defining, Identifying and Measuring Emotions in the Legal Process: Inputs from Relevant Disciplines", began under the moderation of Prof. **Joshua Uyheng**.

In his talk on "Body, Emotions, and their Impact on Cognition and Decision-Making", Prof. **Arno Villringer**, a neuroscientist, presented evidence that emotions can be detected through physiological signals, such as heart rate, blood pressure, and neural activity, and argued that instead of asking whether emotions "start" in the brain or in the body, we should look at integrated brain-body states.

The empirical entry into the conference was succeeded by a philosophical inquiry by Prof. **Emily Kidd White**; she used emotions as a lens for a sharp critique of liberal legal formalism, which rests on an understanding of international law as a "disembodied, disarticulated discipline".

Prof. **Anne van Aaken** showed in her talk how different emotions, such as fear, shame and guilt, a sense of fairness, anger and empathy, are all constitutive for international law. International law, she argued, can benefit from the discussion on the "universality of emotions" when it comes to its own universal normative claim. To this end, she introduced the concept of "situated universality", in which legal norms are grounded in shared human responses but shaped by culture.

In the last talk of the first session, Prof. **Kelebogile Zvobgo** presented empirical data from surveys on the public opinion of the US-American population on a potential accession to the International Criminal Court (ICC), showing how emotional framings shape public trust in international institutions and revealing deep ambivalence toward international criminal justice.



Methods in Research on Emotion

In the second session on research methods, moderated by Prof. **Alexander Mehler**, Prof. **Tilmann Altwicker**, together with **Maja Gwózdź**, and Prof. **Christoph Engel** presented their use of AI tools to detect emotions in the reasoning of courts or applications, respectively. Altwicker and Gwózdź presented their findings of an emotional analysis of all judgments of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). While these judgments showed a stable baseline of affective density, they also identified several decisions with clear emotional spikes – suggesting that even the most formal legal texts carry discernible emotional patterns. Engel analyzed the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on Freedom of Assembly and was able to identify several markers showing the emotional involvement of the applicants.



Prof. **Anna Spain Bradley** also worked on the ICJ, but deployed a qualitative approach interviewing ICJ judges on their handling of emotions in court cases. She presented a future research project where she will investigate in more detail how these judges are treating cases which are particularly prone to evoke emotions, such as those concerning armed conflict, climate change, genocide, and racial discrimination.

Prof. **Emiliano Buis** concluded the academic program of day one with a talk on affective normativity and arms regulation, tracing emotions in the negotiations of different weapon control treaties and arguing that such treaties can be understood as “emotional technologies” that transform diffuse sentiments into binding legal obligations.



The highlight of the conference dinner was the unveiling of the painting “Collision” by **Ismail Noh**, which served as the conference’s key visual. Created in the context of his displacement as a Yazidi refugee, the work captures the clash of fear, hope, and uncertainty that accompanies forced migration. Noh attended the dinner and, together with his brother Jason, recounted their journey from Iraq to Greece, describing how art became a way to process trauma and preserve dignity. By

bringing this story into the heart of the event, “Collision” anchored the conference’s themes in lived experience and will remain present at the Institute as a permanent reminder of the human realities behind international law.

Collective Emotions in Law

Session III opened the second conference day and was dedicated to “Individual and Collective Emotions in the International Legal Order”, moderated by Prof. **Tatjana Papić**.

First, **Prof. Matthias Mahlmann** provided an overview of the various ways in which emotions are relevant for the law, for example as subtle (and not so subtle) influences, as objects of regulation, as elements of a theory of just law, and as forces endangering the foundations of the rule of law. Prof. **Nanying Tao** then analysed national sentiment in China’s engagement with international adjudication, in particular with regard to the South China Sea arbitration, highlighting the enduring impact of humiliation narratives. Several participants noted that national sentiment as a relevant force in international



law is not unique to China, but can also be observed in many other cases, such as Russia and the USA.

In Friday’s third talk, Prof. **Moshe Hirsch** showed the relevance of emotions in the assessment of the legality of “memory laws” by the ECtHR. Hirsch demonstrated the relevance of the specific socio-historical setting of the law, as some collective traumas were taken into consideration by the Court,



e.g. when it comes to mass atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, while it downplayed relevant emotions in other cases as they “cannot be regarded as rational fears”.

Prof. **Seda Gürkan** closed the session with an investigation of how the European Parliament “feels” and experiences cases of growing contestation to democracy and human rights (e.g. in Turkey and Hungary), and whether there is a shared emotion culture across nationalities and political groups in the Parliament.



Universality, Respect, and Emotional “Candles”

The conference ended with Session IV on “International Law and the Universality of Emotions”, moderated by Prof. **Valérie Rosoux**. **Bradley Irish**, a professor of English literature, explored whether a shared core of emotions could ground international law’s claim to universality. He distinguished universal “ur emotions” from culture-specific

emotional scripts and provided a comprehensive overview of the fierce discussion on the universal stability or regional variability of emotions, putting a particular emphasis on recent attempts to reconcile both approaches.



Prof. **Tomer Broude** examined the notion of “respect”, here understood as an emotion, in international law, and showed how it influences legal behavior beyond formal compliance mechanisms, distinguishing strategic deference from genuine respect. In

his case study on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage framework, Broude analyzed the respectful relationships between communities and states, among international experts, and between different nations collaborating on shared heritage projects.

Lastly, **Kiana Daryabeigi Balvardi** navigated through the challenges and prospects in the universe of emotions, emphasising problems of measuring something as subjective and culture-dependent as emotions, and showing how the same emotion can trigger very different actions when it is felt either individually or collectively. She proposed that some institutions may function as emotional “candles”, stabilising collective feeling and shaping how norms take hold. Just like the first day of the conference ended with an

artwork, participants of the workshop were able to admire paintings once more: Balvardi had illustrated her presentation with some of her own paintings.



Across the conference, from judicial anger to collective trauma, from emotional language in judgments to “emotional technologies” in arms control, one conclusion became clear: law, as a human creation, is shaped by emotions and cannot be understood without them. Although the approaches and perspectives were as diverse as the participants’ backgrounds, they converged on one belief: these emotions must be investigated to understand how international law operates – and how it might yet recover its claim to universality.

More photos of the conference: [View on Owncloud](#)