International criminal law is being pulled in different directions by various conflicting considerations – deterrence, retribution, justice for victims, reconciliation, and setting the historical record. This trend is detrimental for the survival of the system as it erodes its coherence and undermines much sought-after legitimacy. There is a dire need for a principle objective that will bring order to the system. Symbolism is a good candidate for this role as it frames all other declared goals of international criminal law. The symbolic value of the discipline rests on the universal consensus it represents. This statement is only partially true, however, for it leaves out extra-legal pragmatic considerations that often counterbalance judicial reasoning during international trials.

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