

Historical Justice and Memory: Questions of Rights and Accountability in Contemporary Society

December 5-7, 2013

AHDA's (The Alliance for Historical Dialogue and Accountability) Dialogues on Historical Justice and Memory Network, at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, will hold its second annual conference in New York City, December 5-7, 2013.

Historical dialogue and accountability is a growing field of advocacy and scholarship that encompasses the efforts in conflict, post-conflict, and post-dictatorial societies to come to terms with their pasts. In contesting nationalist myths and identities, in examining official historical narratives, and opening them to competing narratives about past violence, historical dialogue seeks to provide analysis of past violence grounded in empirical research; acknowledge the victims of past violence and human rights abuses; challenge and deconstruct national, religious, or ethnic memories of heroism and/or victimhood; foster shared work between interlocutors of two or more sides of a conflict; identify and monitor how history is misused to divide society and perpetuate conflict; enhance public discussion about the past.

This conference seeks to consider questions relating to these topics, with primary consideration given to the following themes: sharing sacred spaces; perpetrators as victims; and historical dialogue as part of conflict resolution.

Sharing Sacred Spaces:

Shared sacred spaces, as sites that are significant to more than one religion or ethnic group, can be a source of collaboration or conflict, or somewhere in between, with many possible factors that push in either direction. We are interested in delineating what the particular arrangements of sharing sacred spaces are in the contemporary world and how these forms of sharing are connected to the past. What are the ways in which different religions have come to share a particular site, and has that changed over time? Within these different forms of sharing we also want to explore the factors that lead to conflict or cooperation. With knowledge of these factors, what tools can be developed to address conflict and its causal factors, and what tools can be developed to facilitate greater cooperation and collaboration? Other questions, such as the relationship between sacred spaces and identity, and the use of historical dialogue tools to promote tolerance and respect for a variety of narratives and beliefs are also welcome.

Perpetrators as Victims:

While there is generally great deal of sympathy for victims, the fact remains that not all victims are equal, and not all victimizations are straight-forward. There are many instances of perpetrators in mass violence and war, who in conflict- or post-conflict situations claim the status of victims. Thus their responsibility and guilt is reframed and denied. What is the background of this phenomenon? How does it reflect ideas of collective guilt or the politicization of historical discourse, or does it? What are the dynamics at play in this process, and what are specific case studies in which we can examine them? Papers that explore case studies, the culture of victimization, the ways in which national courts or international tribunals have contributed to the phenomena, and how this phenomenon itself has influenced policies that address coming to terms with the past (among others), are welcome.

Historical dialogue as conflict resolution:

In recent years, societies have begun to pay greater attention to violence and crimes in their histories when moving from an authoritarian state to a democracy, or emerging from a violent conflict like civil war. There are yet other societies that have begun to use historical dialogue to address injustices of the distant past, sometimes even centuries ago. In fact, a society with heightened awareness of its violent historical legacy often has a stronger civic democratic identity and is less prone to propaganda that might cause a new cycle of violence, and in this sense we can think of historical dialogue as part of the larger work of conflict resolution. Nonetheless, the process of historical dialogue as a tool in conflict resolution also faces numerous challenges, and these processes are the focus this conference theme: the divide between theory and practice, between the academy and the practitioner; forging alliances between different groups within the society; questions of a shared language and broader access to resources are only a few topics that consider the broader question about the relationship between historical dialogue and conflict resolution.