

Re-Imagining the Past, International Conference

The international conference, 'Re-Imagining the Past', organized by the Käte Hamburger Kolleg/ Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/ GCR21) and the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) of the University of Ottawa, took place on July 24–25th and focused on the process by which the past is retroactively charged with meaning. Re-imagining, in this context, does not merely stand for the representation of what belongs to the past. Rather, it is a cultural activity, which, as a lynchpin for a transformation of political order, is always also oriented towards the future. Over the two days, the conference brought together scholars from multiple disciplines, with different approaches and frameworks, from all across the world.

The first panel, called 'Hypermasculine Representations and Female Protest', dealt with protests led by women and the construction and representation of masculinity as well as the appropriation and reinterpretation of narratives by right-wing populists. The first two presentations were on women's protests in Brazil and Poland. In the context of Poland, we can observe a new kind of solidarity, in that the protests are being supported by broad parts of the population from the countryside and the cities, and from diverse social groups. The feminist position against the stricter abortion law is increasingly becoming a movement directed against the government as a whole. The third presentation analysed the construction of masculinity in the case of Vladimir Putin in Russia. In the presentation, the speaker showed the different representations of masculinities and how Putin's hypermasculinity is serving as a master-signifier for the construction of national identity as the population is too diverse in terms of religious or ethnic backgrounds to build an homogeneous identity. The fourth presentation dealt with how right-wing populists reinterpret narratives and the past and thus sell the past as the future. It is about the reinterpretation of historical events or figures that are appropriated for right-wing narratives, thus leading to a reinterpretation of history that fits the right-wing populist worldview and supports the constructed homogenous identity.



Eiko Grimberg, visual essay 'Rückschaufehler / Hindsight Bias' (postcards depicting historic sights in Berlin)

The second panel, entitled 'Cultures and Coalitions of the New Right', gathered specialists who discussed the concept of re-imagining the past in the context of the rise of right wing and populist movements. The United-States and Germany were cited as case studies wherein elements from the past are used by such groups to give righteousness and legitimacy to their cause, as well as to invoke an heroic or a victimized past. In Brazil, the impact of the Pentecostal Church in furthering discrimination towards minorities was also pointed out. Presenters then debunked the supposedly necessary return to a 'human nature' as claimed by right wing movements. Finally, the concept of the 'fantasy shield' as conceptualized by Norbert Elias to give to a 'declining nation the strength to carry on' (Elias 2008: 28–29) was shown as an insightful and relevant theory to comprehend the re-imagining of the past by right wing and populist groups.

In the third panel, presenters explored the topic of 'National Politics of Remembrance' as it relates to re-imaginings of the past. Employing concepts such as vicarious identification, vicarious resilience, and vicarious militarism, they analyzed the symbolical re-assertion of British militarized hierarchies of heroism in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a next



Prof. Aleida Assmann, 45th Käte Hamburger Lecture (Keynote)

step, the question of what shape the formation of a collective memory on the War in Afghanistan might take in the wake of its conclusion was discussed, with a look at potential practices and artifacts of commemoration in the US and Germany. Finally, it was argued that imperial imaginations, particularly the motifs of decadence and decline, continue to be of great significance for the use historical narratives, especially in the context of politics.

The fourth panel, 'Transnational Politics of Remembrance', tackled the concept of re-imagining the past by first focusing on the concept of transnationality. By highlighting how indigenous spiritualities have recently been introduced to international law, it was argued that indigenous populations are now considered the 'guardians' of a 'natural' past, common to all. Presenters then turned to crises and war, where Europe's foreign action in the 1990s was discussed. The topic of remembrance was then addressed, showing a discrepancy between how the War in Afghanistan is being remembered in the United States and in Germany. Finally, the premise that re-imagining the past might be harmful to society was countered by the argument that that such practice can also be a useful for progressive social movement as shown by the arts and humanities. In that regard, the keynote from Aleida Assmann, Professor Emerita of British Literature and Literary Studies, from the University of Konstanz, was a fascinating addition to the conference. By reflecting on the different forms of time, whether it is linear or cyclical, the presenter showed how seemingly unique

events are turned into a single narrative, in a liaison between the imaginary and the real. She discussed the different ways of, and reasons for forgetting the past, but also the purpose of remembering it. In fact, Aleida Assmann showed that politics of remembrance have a deeper meaning, a political purpose which carries a normative value: remembering memorials or anniversaries are here to pass on what shall be remembered. It is sometimes a rational decision but often, politics and sites of remembrance are a way to convey the symbolic and the emotional, as nothing disappears across time, especially not traumatic memory.

Under the title 'Sites of Remembrance', presenters in the final panel looked at the role played by the curation of public spaces – both material and virtual – for (trans-)national imaginations and re-imaginings of the past. Starting off with a reflection on the impact of the re-curation of the public sphere on social justice transformations exemplified by the so-called 'Statue Wars', presenters then showcased the significance of embodiment by highlighting how curators of museums and memorial sites attempt to choreograph the public's bodily interactions with such spaces and thus elicit powerful emotional responses. Subsequently, the role of art institutions in the construction of national culture and historical imaginaries was illustrated by means of the example of the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. In a last step, the internet as a potential, but also highly politically contested virtual site of remembrance came into focus.

Overall, the conference was a very fruitful exchange and an interdisciplinary discussion around the topic of Re-Imagining the Past. The conference was rounded off by an artistic intervention by Eiko Grimberg with his visual essay *Rückschaufehler*. Starting from the Berlin Palace, which holds a great deal of historical significance, the artist deals with the paths of the original substance, the stones and ruins that were built up and taken down in the historic center of Berlin in the past century and shows the permanent ascription of meaning and overwriting of places. In relation to the conference, the essay reflected the topic of re-imagining and dealt with the coding and political instrumentalization of places and the resulting consequences.

Victoria Derrien, Marie Kollek, Annie Kuhnert