

Violence and Culture

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Resource Persons:

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Course objectives

"Culture" is often invoked as a contributing cause of conflicts in postsocialist and postcolonial contexts, but it is only recently that the cultural aspects of these conflicts have become central to a range of disciplines, old and new: anthropology, cultural history, studies of visual and material culture, and studies of trauma and memory. On the bases of these new conceptualizations of the cultural, this course will examine political conflict and violence not as an adjunct to or a result of cultural activity, but as a fully cultural materialization and performance. The course will thus consider the centrality of cultural issues in ethnic, religious and national conflict, attempting to ascertain the place of political conflict and violence within the field of culture and the cultural status of the experience, representation and interpretation of conflict and violence.

The course will thus approach culture and political violence from two complementary angles: first, a historical, theoretical and methodological one, grounded in the most important issues challenging scholars of culture and political violence, and second, an examination of case studies that integrate fieldwork and theoretical and methodological innovations. Half of the course's lecturers work on political conflict and violence in Central and Eastern Europe (Germany and the former Yugoslavia), while the other half work in areas of conflict throughout the world: Nigeria, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Sri Lanka. The course will thus cut across simple distinctions between "East" and "West," with Central and Eastern Europe related to postsocialist and postcolonialist political geographies around the world.

Syllabus

Week 1: Violence and Culture: Historical, Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In the first week of the course, we will rehearse recent developments in several academic disciplines that have foregrounded the cultural dimensions of political conflict and violence. Until recently, conventional academic divisions of labor have marginalized the cultural study of both international and intranational conflicts. Shaped by the emergence of interdisciplinary academic fields, an increase in the global volume and speed of telecommunications and media, as well as the eruption of political conflicts in postcolonial and post-Soviet contexts, scholars have begun to reconsider the meaning and value of the concept of culture, especially in terms of its relation to political violence. We will focus on four moments of this reconsideration.

First, the shift in anthropology from a concept of culture as an unchanging, stable, non-modern entity to a concept of culture as dynamic, unstable and complexly-structured. This shift can be identified with the anthropological analyses of rebellion, revolution, resistance, decolonization and war.

Second, the move from studies of art and architecture to studies of visual and material culture. This shift in the study of artifacts from auratic aesthetic works to more broadly-conceived categories of images and objects has yielded, among other things, a new attention to the visual and material dimensions of extra-artistic reality, and especially to such "produced" realities as those of political conflict and violence.

Third, the revision of the concept of "culture" in studies of postcolonial and post-Soviet societies in transition. These studies have evinced concern for such things as the dialogic invention of culture in colonial and postcolonial societies, the cultural dimensions of struggles for independence in colonial societies, the emergence of multiple and alternative modernities, and the appropriations, assimilations and transformations of culture in newly-formed states. As well as prompting new considerations of culture in transformative and transnational contexts, these studies have also prompted consideration of the value of the concept of "culture" itself, leading to displacements of "culture" by such concepts as "discourse" and "narrative."

Fourth, the application of hitherto individual psychological phenomena such as trauma, memory, and identity to the analyses of these phenomena as fully intersubjective, shaping and shaped by relations between individuals and ethnic, religious and national groups. Accordingly, the emergence of studies of collective trauma and memory has opened up new possibilities to understand political conflict and violence.

Week 2: Cultural Constructions of Political Conflict and Violence: Case Studies

In the second week of the course, we will turn to case studies of culture and political conflict and violence. In these case studies, we will focus on several common themes: a sense of place and belonging in postcolonial and post-Soviet political geographies; embodied ethnicity, religion and body politics; emerging forms of identity, memory and agency; narrations and media representations of violence and/or indifference; and concepts of truth, justice and reconciliation. The case studies will deal with a series of different regions, placing Central and Eastern Europe in an expanded global context, and with different methodological structures.

Andrew Herscher will examine the spatial logic of political violence in Kosovo, focusing on uses and interpretations of the built environment that are understood as conflictual or violent. He will thus counter the conventional understanding of architecture and public space as containers for or objects of violence with conceptualizations of the preceding as social products, conditioning as well as conditioned by political rationalities and programs.

Tomislav Longinovic will examine the instrumentalization of culture in literature, music and films in the former Yugoslavia, analyzing both cultural work that justified and perpetuated nationalist conflict and violence, and also work that invoked human rights or the violence inherent in discourses of nationalist exclusion.

Uli Linke will examine the paradoxes of German unification in the context of European unification, showing how assertions of nationhood take center stage in attempts to accommodate the demands of globalization. She will focus on the promulgation of an authentic or "natural" German subjectivity through recourse to regimes of citizenship (blood) and nationality (language), and the corresponding rise of a new politics of exclusion, framed by anti-immigrant sentiments, the closure of borders, and ethno-racial violence.

Allen Feldman will examine the integration of chronic political violence into everyday life in Northern Ireland and South Africa. Through a political anthropology of the body and the senses, he will look at how political violence generates ethnic identity and other cultural practices through material interventions in embodiment and the education of the senses.

Conerly Casey will examine performative dimensions of political violence among Muslim Hausa and Christian Yoruba and Igbo in Kano, Nigeria. Through an analysis of the recent implementation of Shari'ah Law as Kano State Law, she will discuss political violence as it manifests through the performance of contentious cultural concepts and the redeployment of profiling, witnessing and confession.