

DISCOURSES OF MASS VIOLENCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

5 MARCH 2021

— Mass violence against unprotected civilians seems hard to justify and yet so often happens. In the modern world, mass violence – understood as comprising mass killings and other forms of violence that aim at exterminating large groups of people – seems to go against common moral feelings and convictions. Still, the 20th and 21st centuries have been marked by mass atrocities at an alarming scale. Humanity's long history of mass violence is unpleasant to face up to and frequently repressed in cultural memory. So, a common effort of the social sciences and the humanities at large is needed to understand the dynamics of mass violence to help prevent similar developments in the future. While systematic efforts have been undertaken in the social sciences to analyse the relevant political, economic, and socio-psychological dynamics, especially under the label 'genocide studies', and much work has been done in historical and cultural studies to scrutinize events of mass atrocities in the distant past, systematic interdisciplinary collaboration between historical and cultural studies with the social sciences is needed to enhance our understanding of the historical depth, long-term developments and ideological structures that contribute to events of mass violence.

— The rationale for the project is that while legitimizing narratives may be conceived as mere pretexts to manifest material interests in acts of mass violence, they, nevertheless, establish the terminology and logic in which these acts are subsequently discussed by inscribing them into cultural traditions. Due to legitimizing narratives, events of mass violence do not remain single, seemingly exorbitant acts, but have a lasting historical impact by shaping the linguistic and thus heuristic framework of their subsequent evaluation, which complicates public critique and condemnation. Understanding the structures and dynamics of this transgenerational tradition is still largely a research lacuna; filling it is a crucial contribution of the humanities to the interdisciplinary research in mass violence.

— The objective of the workshop is to inquire into the narratives, terminologies, and validation categories employed to legitimize events of mass violence, both in foresight and in retrospect. The principle research question is how meaningful connections between instances of mass violence and their discursive surroundings can be established. This question shall be addressed by examining the role of the cultural canon in legitimizing discourses: How have sacred texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an as well as classics in philosophy and literature been employed to promote mass violence in political propaganda? How are such readings negotiated in contemporary literary texts scrutinizing the memory, displacement, or repression of these events? What is the role of representation especially in documentary fiction which cannot but voice legitimizing narratives, terminologies, and validations in order to testify to atrocities, yet might thus be seen to contribute to their transgenerational transmission even in criticizing them? How does this lasting impact of justificatory narratives of mass violence affect the view of canonical texts? How is the vocabulary of violence formed and how does it flow between linguistic, cultural and historical contexts? Contributions should present test cases that involve selected texts from literary classics and specific historical instances of their use to promote mass violence, or criticisms thereof.

— The aim of the workshop is to sound the ground for a larger research project that aims at fostering such systematic interdisciplinary collaboration. It brings together experts from literature and history with experts in the social sciences to discuss the role of ancient cultural resources in the promotion and justification of mass violence. The workshop will pay particular attention to the methodology, especially to the comparative approach, to transcultural research, and *longue durée* interdisciplinary research.

8:45 INTRODUCTION

– 8:55

8:55

– 9:30

9:30

– 10:05

10:05

– 10:40

COFFEE BREAK

11:10

– 11:45

11:45

– 12:20

12:20

– 12:55

LUNCH BREAK

15:00

– 15:35

15:35

– 16:10

16:10

– 16:45

COFFEE BREAK

17:00

– 17:30

DINNER (ca. 19:00)

ORGANIZATION

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