

Panel summary:

Power and the contestation of the past: memories, legacies and strategic narratives in international perspective

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With his seminal book on “The invention of tradition” the historian Eric Hobsbawm fundamentally changed the way in which scholars approach the past. Rather than being a sequence of objective events, history came to be understood as a social construction, emerging from narratives and interpretations generated by the stories told by people, official rituals of memorization and even the symbolic environment of artefacts and everyday objects. In the constructivist view, history is fluid, malleable and ambiguous and thus open to evaluative contestation and re-invention. Current conflicts and social transformations frequently trigger the search for meaning and explanation in historical events, thereby re-inventing how the past is understood. It can therefore be argued that the present shapes the past as much as the past shapes the course of present events.

Most of the existing research focuses on the role of collective memories in the formation of social and cultural identities. Less attention has been given to narratives of the past that utilize historical frames in order to achieve political goals. Moreover, we know very little about the role of frames of the past in international politics where different narratives intersect, compete and collide.

The papers of this panel aim to address these gaps by addressing the strategic role of history and collective memories in processes of power struggles and contested politics in the context of international relations and global developments. All studies presented in this panel focus on particular moments of rupture and discontinuity: Two papers (Krstic and Milojevic; Lohner, Banjac and Neverla) explore how the regime transition from authoritarianism to democracy is interpreted and contested in public discourses. Two other papers (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt; Sangar) use sophisticated methodologies to investigate conflict discourses in different Western and non-Western contexts. And O’Loughlin and Miskimmon the role of strategic narratives in international negotiations. In all cases, the framing of the past played a crucial role in the dynamics and outcomes of the contestation. However, while there are clear indications that the mobilisation of the past perpetuates and intensifies conflict, there is evidence that the past can also serve as a force to broker consensus and reconciliation.

Another theme that runs through the five papers of this panel is the role of the media and journalism in constructing the past. In ongoing conflicts and social upheavals the media serve as a forum where narratives of the past are remediated and reinterpreted. Periods of social and political discontinuities therefore fundamentally challenge the position of journalism and journalists, forcing them to forge new professional identities between the legacies of the past and the changing realities of the present.

Taken together, this panel provides insights into the role of narratives of the past in contemporary conflicts and power struggles. The analysis of international conflicts and global ruptures helps to understand the ambivalent role of history frames as both a polarizing and a bridging force. Furthermore, the studies presented open up new avenues for future research in an emerging field.