IMAGINING VIOLENCE
The Politics of Narrative and Representation

DIRECTORS
Dr Mathias Thaler
Chancellor’s Fellow
University of Edinburgh, UK
mathias.thaler@ed.ac.uk
https://mthaler.wordpress.com/

Dr Mihaela Mihai
Senior Research Fellow
University of Edinburgh, UK
mihaela.mihai@ed.ac.uk
https://sites.google.com/site/mihaipolitics/Home

Please contact both directors if you have any queries about the workshop.

GENERAL INFORMATION
For generic information about the Joint Sessions, including advice on travel arrangements and funding opportunities, please consult the regularly updated ECPR website: http://www.ecpr.eu/Events/EventDetails.aspx?EventID=101

OUTLINE
Understanding political violence involves many different theoretical and practical operations: from examining the social macro-structures that both enable and constrain actors engaging in violence, to investigating the motives and drives of individual perpetrators. A myriad of disciplinary approaches, both in the social sciences and the humanities, contribute to the study of political violence. One aspect, however, has received relatively little attention, even though it is central to a holistic approach to political violence: the faculty of imagination. We broadly conceptualize imagination as the ability to make present what is absent. As such, imagination is different from, and yet related to, both reason and emotion.

This workshop will interrogate the role that the faculty of imagination can play in understanding past, as well as on-going, instances of political violence. Several questions motivate this workshop: Can certain uses of the imagination help us tackle the challenge of responding to unprecedented forms of violence? More concretely, in the aftermath of conflicts, what is the political value of literature and cinema recounting human rights violations? What about the use of counterfactuals in philosophical justifications of policy measures with regards to vio-
Can media representations of distant suffering facilitate processes of understanding, build solidarity and catalyse action? Or are they inexorably entangled in ideological manoeuvres?

Political theorists, IR scholars as well as comparativists have recently begun to raise these questions by looking into the politics of representation and narrative in the context of violence. What unites these approaches is an interest in how images and stories relate to the real world of politics. Scholars have been investigating whether, as products of the imagination, representations can have a cathartic effect on democratic societies emerging from a past of violence, give voice to victims and witnesses, trigger processes of reconciliation and forgiveness or become part of the wider societal conversation about ongoing conflicts. This workshop situates itself at the productive confluence of these fields of inquiry.

No ECPR Joint Session workshop in recent times has grappled with the politics of representation and narrative. We will fill this gap by creating a forum for discussion among four constituencies within the profession: (1) political theorists working on the faculty of imagination and how it relates to other human capacities essential to political action; (2) students of transitional justice who examine the role of art in promoting reconciliation and democratic values in the wake of conflict; (3) IR scholars working at the intersection between politics and aesthetics; and (4) comparativists who investigate the institutional and informal mechanisms of tackling violence contextually. The interdisciplinary nature of the workshop will facilitate an inclusive and reflexive debate on the role that imagination as a faculty – and its artistic, philosophical and methodological expressions – can play in unpacking complex issues of political violence.

PARTICIPANTS

To be eligible, aspiring participants must be currently conducting research in the fields of the workshop. In selecting participants we will aim to facilitate an interdisciplinary debate. Therefore, we invite empirical, comparative as well as theoretical contributions to the topic. We strive to achieve a fair gender, country and career balance. Doctoral students must be well advanced in their research to be considered for participation. For presentation at the Joint Sessions, we require fully developed papers that have not yet been published. Participants may attend only one workshop and should arrange to be in Pisa for the entire duration of the Joint Sessions.

FORMAT

The workshop will last the whole eight sessions (each session being a morning or afternoon) of the Joint Sessions. Participants are expected to be present and engage in constructive discussions during all eight sessions, not just on the day
they present their own paper. Since this is a pre-read event, we will ask all participants to share their papers well in advance of the workshop to enable productive conversations.

KEY DATES
1 August 2015: Call for Papers opens.
1 October 2015: Funding applications open.
1 December 2015: Call for Papers closes.
18 January 2016: Funding applications close.
31 January 2016: Registration closes (TBC).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND
The workshop theme is grounded in research across various empirically as well as theoretically oriented fields of Political Science. Over the past 20 years, the faculty of imagination has become an intriguing object of inquiry for three categories of scholars: (1) those interested in analysing artistic productions and how they illuminate – or obscure – political issues, violence among them; (2) social scientists looking to aesthetics for alternative methodological insights; and (3) scholars devising thought experiments when investigating moral and political dilemmas. Let us quickly rehearse how these general interests in the faculty of imagination have translated into concrete research.

In Political Theory, authors have been theorising the role of art in processes of mobilisation by the oppressed, social criticism and moral progress, among others (Nussbaum 2001; Disch 1994; Stone-Mediatore 2003). Inspired by reflection on the role of art and storytelling in the wake of the Holocaust (Arendt, 1967; Feldman 1991; Lang 2000; Mandel 2001) various scholars in the field of Transitional Justice have examined the contribution that art can make in the aftermath of violence. Art is thought to open the political space for conflict transformation; kick-start transitional justice processes; enable shared historical meaning (Rush and Simić 2014); create solidarity with the victims (Scheub 2005); look at the past in order to build a future (Hemer 2012); promote healing for the victims (Simić and Daly 2012); give voice to those who suffered (Bisschoff 2013); constitute justice in itself (Dube 2011); offer a complex emotional picture of suffering (Feldman 2001); and distort stories of linear historical causality (Zolkos 2008).

In IR, too, there has been an aesthetic turn, with scholars focusing on aesthetics as methodology and on what the artistic imagination can disclose about the nature of international practices, conflicts and norms (Bleiker 2001; Hutchinson 2010; Carver 2010). IR researchers have attempted to explore why aesthetics may provide a different type of knowledge that cannot be tested via the tradi-
tional methods in social science, but which nonetheless enriches our capacity to unpack and capture political complexity. Last but not least, an important methodological discussion has unfolded around the use of hypotheticals and counterfactuals in the social sciences. Thought experiments play an especially pronounced role in Political Theory, where they serve various functions such as stipulating counter-examples, creating mechanisms to tease out supposedly widely shared intuitions, providing clarification and issuing invitations to re-imagine age-old problems. (Sorensen 1993; Brown & Fehige 2014; Miščević 2013). In particular, the torture debates of the past 10 years have re-ignited the discussion around the usefulness of imaginary cases, such as the (in)famous “ticking bomb” scenario. In IR (and History), too, counterfactuals have recently received careful attention (Lebow 2010, Ferguson 2010).

This workshop seeks to cross-pollinate insights from these debates to (1) examine the nature of the imagination as an epistemic as well as political faculty; (2) comparatively analyse the power of various products of imagination (counterfactuals, thought experiments, literature, cinema, theatre, music and pictorial representations) to better understand and tackle political violence; (3) problematise the kind of knowledge one gathers through the faculty of the imagination; (4) analyse a wealth of examples of the use of imagination in both scientific inquiry and political processes.

REFERENCES

• Hemer, Oscar. *Fiction and Truth in Transition* (Lit Verlag, 2012).