Culture, Conflict and Post-Conflict Symposium

AHRC Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past
AHRC Cultural Value Project
9th - 10th September 2014

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Marlene Steyn. Blended brothers, 2011; Oil and mixed media on canvas, 168 x 151, 5cm
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Culture, Conflict and Post-Conflict: An International Symposium

The aim of this two-day research symposium is to consider the role of art and cultural practices in the process of post-conflict resolution and transformation as well as their ability to generate and sustain conflicts. These issues will be explored with special reference to conflict and post-conflict situations within the boundaries of states, with a primary but not exclusive emphasis on South Africa, Northern Ireland and Bosnia.

Art and culture are often given some prominence amongst the tools that are used to reconcile communities and to help deal with personal and collective trauma. Why is that the case, how effective is this approach and what complexities surround this process? At the same time, how can we understand the fact that art and culture have often contributed to generating and sustaining conflicts and can be responsible for prolonging unrest after formal peace is achieved? How can culture create shared spaces in segregated and transitional societies while at the same time nurturing memories of conflict or supporting hegemonic practices which trigger antagonisms? These and related questions will be explored at the symposium.

Two current major programmes of the Arts & Humanities Research Council have come together to organise this symposium. For the Cultural Value Project (opens in a new window), the role of culture in post-conflict reconciliation provides an example of the ways in which art and culture can enlarge people’s experiences and enable them to think about other peoples and about difference in a context potentially more neutral and more engaged than might be produced by more conventional political means. The arts and culture can offer individuals and societies the potential for healing after the experience of trauma, equally, the Cultural Value Project acknowledges the role of culture in helping to trigger, exacerbate and sustain the very conflicts which it is sometimes called upon to heal. For the Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past Theme (opens in a new window), questions of memory, healing and trauma, as well as the dynamics of relationships between generations, are of central concern. The programme seeks to understand how societies come to terms with difficult and divisive pasts, how past conflicts are reproduced in present generations, and how different creative, literary and artistic modes of engagement with the past may help to envisage alternative futures. It recognises the complexities of cultural phenomena, and the need to distinguish between the role that culture can play in the politics of identity formation and representation on the one hand, and its role through in the mediation of conflict on the other.
Key questions for the symposium include:

- How do cultural activities and practices articulate different and potentially divergent ideas about how to ‘work through history’, foster mutual respect and understanding, and move peace processes forward by enabling bridges to be constructed between communities and between people?
- How can we understand the fact that art and culture have often been an element generating and sustaining conflict while they may nonetheless have also constituted a force for reconciliation and for the rebuilding of broken relationships after the trauma of conflict?
- How in the aftermath of conflict do state-supported institutions and state funding determine the ways in which different kinds of cultural activity and practice legitimise and sustain some while marginalising and even rejecting others?
- In what ways do cultural activity and practice provide different and effective ways of enabling individuals and communities to explore complex issues of memory, trauma and reconciliation?
- How do cultural activity and practice shape different stages on the continuum of peace processes (pre-negotiation, ceasefires, negotiation, settlement, consolidation)?

We are defining cultural activity and practice broadly to include, but not to be limited to: museums, archives, tangible and intangible heritage, theatre, film, visual arts, photography, literature, storytelling, music, monuments, marching, murals and ritual.

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