



Disputed Territories & Memory (DisTerrMem)

Call for papers

Pathways to Agonism: theoretical and practical approaches to the Legacies of Disputed Territories

Hybrid International Conference

The Institute of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Kaunas, Lithuania

Borderland Foundation, Sejny, Poland

28th – 30th September 2023

In recent years, violent conflicts have been intensifying across the world. The rise of national antagonisms has triggered the unexpected outbreak of a new war in Ukraine and the escalation of earlier conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, in the Caucasus region. The Middle East has also witnessed war in Syria while in Asia border skirmishes between India and Pakistan have been ongoing. As this international context demonstrates, dealing with the competing memories of disputed territories remains today a pressing challenge for policy makers, supranational organisations, heritage institutions and civil society. As territorial disputes are the major causes of international conflict, the final conference of DisTerrMem invites contributors to reflect on the ways in which they are collectively remembered and understood in our societies.

DisTerrMem (2019-2024) is an EU-funded project exploring memory practices engaging with conflicts and disputed territories. Participants from seven international partner organisations explore the management of competing memories across borders which play a key role in framing current perspectives and shaping identities that affect the potential for dialogue, understanding and peace. We think about memory in two quintessential ways: as an abstract theoretical model and as a social practice. Both perspectives are crucial to developing novel approaches which can help support mutual understanding, and processes of peace building/peace keeping.

Our project explores the theoretical model of 'memory work in an agonistic mode'. This model has been developed by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen (2020) who adapted Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy (2005, 2009, 2013) to the field of memory studies, as well as Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner (2022). The main advantage of the agonistic model is its capacity to expose socio-political struggles for domination that underpin interpretations of the past and its ability to promote encounters and debates with 'the other' perceived as an adversary rather than an enemy. This approach responds to the shortcomings of the currently dominant cosmopolitan approach to memory, which has provided fertile ground for the re-emergence of antagonistic memories supported by populist, neo-nationalist movements. The agonistic approach aims to bridge the gap between different viewpoints by allowing for the possibility of conflict without fixing the lines between friends and foes. In contrast to the antagonistic and cosmopolitan modes, it rejects the desirability of developing a single overarching narrative of the past. Instead, it strives to acknowledge a variety of overlapping and sometimes contrasting memories of the past by promoting radical multiperspectivism and open-ended dialogue with 'the other'.

Throughout the project, we have advocated a praxiological approach to memory – first developed in the 1990s (Olick and Robbins 1998), and more recently revisited by Haskins (2015) and Clarke et al. (2022) – to better embed agonistic optics in a deep, contextual understanding of how memory work is conducted on the ground. We focus on memory work undertaken by specific institutions and social actors particularly in Poland, Armenia, Lithuania and Pakistan, where our project’s main case studies are based. We are especially interested in empirically testing the potential of the agonistic approach in different cultural and institutional settings and analysing the dynamics of social agency in relation to collective memories, that is, examining ‘practices that mediate between agents and structures’ (Wüstenberg 2020) at different levels. We have been exploring various practices which can support agonistic engagement with the memory of disputed territories, as well as ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) that have the potential to build trust-based relationships between divided communities, overcoming antagonistic separation through mutually beneficial joint enterprises that nevertheless acknowledge difference and past conflict. We have also examined some of the blind spots and shortcomings of the agonistic approach, with a particular focus on socio-political conditions that might hinder or prevent the broader dissemination of this mode of memory.

Our final conference, to be held on 28th -30th September 2023, seeks to promote a reflection on various pathways leading to agonism, from broad avenues to narrow passages and even some dead ends. The concept of the pathway allows to integrate both the model-oriented and the practice-driven approaches and thus it can inspire research on memory work in a variety of directions. To explore this concept, we call for papers examining the potential of and challenges to the agonistic framework in context-sensitive ways. We hope that contributions looking at a variety of contexts will complement the insights emerging from our research so far undertaken and will help decentralise the agonistic framework and develop innovative strategies and methods able to support the successful management of competing memories in the context of peacebuilding. We propose that delegates explore some of the following empirical and theoretical axes:

1. Agonistic memory and contemporary conflicts

- How has the recent intensification or return of violent conflicts impacted on contemporary approaches to the memory of wars and disputed territories?
- How are current conflicts changing the ways in which national pasts are understood and institutionalised in particular countries? How does memory politics shape conflicts on the ground in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Asia and beyond?
- How do different commemorative strategies including agonism operate under the conditions of sustained political polarisation and how do they modify local and national memoryscapes?
- To what extent do nation states, supranational organisations, civil society groups and cultural practitioners involved in managing memories of conflicted territories consider agonistic approaches as useful or, on the contrary, potentially risky for peace keeping?

2. The agonistic framework in theory

- One of the criticisms aimed at agonistic memory is that it risks exacerbating conflicts. To what extent has this proved to be the case? In which contexts and times and by which agents can agonistic memory be best fostered? Under what conditions is it the most effective at countering antagonistic memory? Conversely, can specific contexts, times and agents be identified in which agonistic approaches have successfully promoted more inclusive practices?
- How to understand concepts such as *memory conflicts*, *memory struggles* or *mnemonic wars*, which, in the context of ongoing conflicts, cease to be merely interesting intellectual metaphors?

3. Agonistic memory practices

- What practices can best support agonistic engagement with the memory of disputed territories including, among others, memory mapping, arts-based Co-Creation workshops, interview as a practice exposing oral history, bottom-up, ethnographic research, grassroots commemorations of the past and other official or alternative practices?

- How do agents of cosmopolitan and agonistic memories interact with antagonistic ones at supranational, national and local levels? Which approaches work best at countering antagonistic practices in specific contexts and at specific times?
- How to effectively break down antagonistic, mutually hostile modes of remembrance towards developing more inclusive, perhaps agonistic, models of understanding the past?

We are inviting paper proposals developing a reflection relevant to one or more of these axes from both academic researchers and practitioners including policy makers, cultural practitioners, heritage professionals, members of NGOs, and other professional bodies. **300-word proposals** accompanied by **5 keywords** and **100-word biographies** should be submitted by **31st January 2023** to disputedterritoriesandmemory@gmail.com. Accepted speakers will be notified by 15th March 2023. A selection of papers presented at the conference will be published as part of a peer-reviewed book with an internationally known publisher. The selection will privilege comparative papers focusing on the broad regions explored by our project. Authors wishing to be considered for publication will be asked to submit their completed papers by 15th June 2023, will receive comments from peer-reviewers by 31st August and will submit the final version of their texts by 31st October 2023. The book is expected to be published in 2024.

This immersive conference will be co-hosted by two partners involved in the DisTerrMem project, the Institute of Grand Duchy of Lithuania in Kaunas, Lithuania and Borderland Foundation in Sejny/Krasnogruda, Poland. It will take a cross-border format to provide delegates with insight into the work of two civil society organisations that build bridges between people of different religions, nationalities and cultures. The conference will start in Kaunas on 28th September. In the morning of 29th September, delegates will take a bus together to Sejny where the conference will continue and end on 30th September. Transport, accommodation and maintenance in Sejny will be provided by the organisers. A rich cultural programme will be provided, drawing on the work of borderland studios, including music, theatre, film and visual art.

Borderland Foundation is a non-profit organisation that, since 1990, has promoted diversity and the borderland ethos through activities bringing living culture into dialogue with the region's rich heritage and bridging different nationalities, religions, generations and languages. The Foundation is involved in both day-to-day work with local communities through different workshops linking art and education with integrative practices and international activities ranging from the creation to the dissemination of new forms of art and intercultural education, training of leaders in these activities and promotion of good practices in the field. Long-term activities carried out in this area also include the creation of an International Centre for Dialogue (ICD) at the restored manor and park of Krasnogruda. The ICD develops educational activities based on artistic creativity and socially engaged action.

The Institute of Grand Duchy of Lithuania was founded in 2009 by a group of intellectuals from Poland and Lithuania, later joined by representatives of other countries from the region. The Institute's primary goal is to share and promote the history, heritage and legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as to organise research on its history and on the countries related to it (Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Ukraine). In 2015 the Institute was awarded the Jerzy Giedroyc Prize by the Polish daily "Rzeczpospolita". The Institute is closely related to Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania.

