

*As a society, we need to
develop responsiveness
towards the witnessing
of institutional injustices.*

Speaker

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European
Peace
Conference

Responding to institutional witnessing

Prof. dr. Nicole Immler on the ambivalence of recognition politics

*We are excited to announce **Prof. dr. Nicole Immler** as a speaker on institutional witnessing at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.*

Prof. dr. Nicole Immler

Prof. dr. Nicole Immler is an expert on transitional justice, memory and history. She has written many publications on multi-generational memory and post-colonial histories. Last year, she was involved in reviewing the reparations methods in the benefits scandal. Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference, came across Nicole's work through an interview with one of our ambassadors.

What is institutional witnessing?

"Institutional witnessing is a concept I am currently writing about. It is when we witness some violence or destructive dynamic within institutions. Often those observations are articulated and shared. However, often there is a lack of response, thus no meaningful action from those responsible or those in power within the institution."

What makes you interested in institutional witnessing?

"What intrigues me: We often think that talking about the victims is enough. But who is on the other side? This blind eye for those who victimise makes it difficult to pinpoint responsibility and to stop cycles of violence caused by cycles of neglect. For example, in the case of the Catholic Church, the sexual abuse is documented in hundreds of pages, in Ireland, in the Netherlands, and many other places. Yet, instead of confronting and punishing the abusive priests, they were just transferred to a different church (as bad managers are promoted into somewhat remote places). How can we address such patterns of institutionalised violence? How can we address collective blindfoldedness? How can our institutions take responsibility and act, even when officials do not see themselves as personally responsible? How can we change the procedures that repeat institutional injustice?"

Do recognition politics address institutional injustices?

“Yes, potentially they could. However, in today’s recognition policy, there are a few pressing issues. People generally feel personally criticised when being asked to take responsibility. However, research into practices of injustice is not about the individuals themselves. Instead, it is about the procedures and actions legitimised within their institution. For example, when we review peace missions, soldiers feel immediately criticised due to a sense of guilt while we explore the mindset of culture of military organisations. Secondly, lots of reparation and justice concepts we use, such as monetary compensation, are only quick fixes. They do not allow to see the structural harm done. For example, in my research on what is meant by ‘reparations’ for Dutch slavery, members of the Caribbean community in the Netherlands wanted to talk about what the islands need from their point of view. As long as the Dutch government determines how reparations look like, colonial power dynamics are reproduced. Not the one who is accountable but the one who is victimised should determine the conditions of reparations. This needs a dialogue between equal partners before. After all, meaningful recognition is often defined as transforming the relationship between both parties; such as for example between the Dutch Caribbean islands and the kingdom of the Netherlands, aiming for more equality. Here important to think beyond coloniser/colonised binaries, as for repair one needs also to reach beyond simplified identities and add historical complexities.”

*Meaningful
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What makes intergenerational recognition politics a complex undertaking according to you?

“Racism is still part of our culture, thus it is not only about repairing the past but also about addressing it in the present. In the words of Urwin Vyent, the director of NiNsee (the National Institute for Dutch Slavery Past and Heritage), I once quoted in an article saying that the racism debate is much too superficial; it is not only about the relationship between black and white but also between black and black. Those victimised can reproduce the victimisation they were subjected to. On the other hand, ‘white privilege’ is often not acknowledged enough in how it profits from colonial proprietary structures still in place today, such as for example in extractive tourism on the Dutch Caribbean islands, or the harmful gas extraction of Shell in for example Nigeria and in Groningen.”

What makes recognition politics uncomfortable for both parties?

“In court cases, both sides have something to lose. Victims want to be seen in how they have been victimised. Yet, to be referred to as victim solely makes them uncomfortable as well as it reduces their identity. While they need a victim status in order to make claims for reparation, it does stigmatise them as passive and as a recipient. It is one of the reasons why most victims want to be called ‘survivors’ or just ‘children’ instead of ‘benefits scandal children’. On the perpetrator side, the question of responsibility often gets blurred as its mindsets and cultures within institutions that feed violence and injustice. For example, while some want to have criminal charges against those that co-authored the Dutch child benefits scandal, the mainstream calls for financial compensation. From research however we know that the calls for recognition are much broader; it is social repair people wait for. This starts with seeing those victimised as experts of their own repair process. Ask them what they need, then one would realise that many desires are less about repairing past harms than enabling more just futures.”

How are we all implicated in ignoring acts of institutional witnessing?

“In my view, the dichotomy of perpetrators versus victims does not do justice to the complexity of institutional injustice, moreover, it silences various forms of implicatedness. Instead of playing the blame and guilt game, I think we should extend our terminology. How to reach beyond perpetrator and victim labels? Michael Rothberg speaks of the ‘implicated subject’. There are different forms of implicatedness, the ways people are implicated in the structures that allow the violence to happen or structures that allow to profit from ‘white privilege’. Both create responsibilities. The responsibility for example to witness and to act upon, as individual but also as collective. As a society, we need more acts of institutional witnessing.”

In order to do justice to the complexity of institutional injustice, we need to look beyond the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims.

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- Immler, N. (2021). [Colonial history at court: Legal decisions and their dilemmas](#). In J. Bhabha et al. (Eds.), *Time for Reparations: A Global Perspective* (pp. 153–167). Penn Press. *Examines legal complexities in transitional justice related to colonialism.*
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Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

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