



THE
SIGOURNEY
AWARD

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2019

CONFERENCE 2021

8th – 11th April

WALLS - OPEN, CLOSED, SLIDING? THE VIRUS, EUROPE AND OUR WORLD TODAY

An Online Experiential Working Conference

in the Series: The Past in The Present

The PCCA 2020 conference “WALLS – OPEN, CLOSED, SLIDING? EUROPE AND OUR WORLD TODAY”, originally to be held in The Netherlands in summer 2020, had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our lives had to change dramatically, and we had to adjust in order to hopefully survive physically and mentally.

We believe that there is a ‘before’ the pandemic that still exists, there is a ‘present’ that we have to manage as best as we can, and a very uncertain future; however, the vaccine makes us hopeful.

Based on these considerations, we have decided to hold a pilot conference in a completely new territory, for the first time online, from **8th to 11th April 2021**.

The title is:

WALLS – OPEN, CLOSED, SLIDING? THE VIRUS, EUROPE, AND OUR WORLD TODAY.

Like the rest of the world, Europe is struggling to cope with the traumatic impact of the **Coronavirus pandemic** and its aftermath, which is still unknown.

Dark clouds had already started to gather across the continent before, threatening the union that was conceived in the shadow of the Holocaust and World War II, with the aim to avoid a repetition of the horrors of the past. These clouds entailed:

- The influx of migrants from Africa and the Middle East, which brought about fears of ‘invasion’.
- The tension in the Middle East: the endless conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the disastrous situation in the region in general.
- The fear of a terrorist attack.
- A disturbing upsurge of neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, racial intolerance, fascism and authoritarianism.
- Nationalist populism – e.g. Brexit and the rise of far right parties across Europe – which reinforced the wish for strong borders/walls to keep out the “other”.
- Instability in the financial sector also continues generating tension between the strong EU core in the West, and the periphery – the austerity-ridden Mediterranean and the poorer Eastern Europe.
- A growing gap between the rich “elites” and the poor (“the people”) – as a consequence of globalization and de-industrialization.
- Growing alarm, alongside denial, over climate change, spawning a culture of intergenerational blame.

Into this already fragile situation the Coronavirus **pandemic, an invisible enemy, landed like a bombshell**, leading to:

- Worldwide lockdowns, social-distancing, and self- isolation.
- The need for decisive action in an health emergency that could easily be, or be seen to be, an invitation to authoritarian leadership that might undermine long-established democratic systems of governance.
- An economic disaster affecting all, but disproportionately those countries with a weaker economy and less stable political systems.
- A massive debt burden left for successor generations.
- Deepening intergenerational tension, for instance over whose care is to be prioritized.
- A further increase in the disparity between the rich, who have increased their wealth, and the poor, who are the victims of this battle, unemployed, and with much less resources.
- Divisions and splits are increasing, sometimes reactivating old enmities in response the existential threat posed by the pandemic. Is the resurgence of the “Black Lives Matter” movement an instance of this?
- Does the hope now rightly invested in vaccines also conceal a fantasy that they will somehow magically deliver us from the complex situation that now confronts us?

Today Europe and the world are deeply traumatised by the loss of many loved ones, often without the ability to pay one’s last respects, and all other kinds of losses on a mass scale.

Our old familiar world and much that we used to take for granted are now in the past, and anxiety, disorientation, and uncertainty confront us in the present. What resources do we bring for facing this situation as we prepare for the post-traumatic period of rebuilding and reconstruction?

The virus and the consequent lockdown have brought a new emphasis on **walls** – to keep out the virus and those who carry it, to draw lines separating those who are employed and those who are unemployed or involved in activities that have had to be closed to avoid contagion, hopefully only temporarily, and between the more privileged who can work remotely, and be protected from the worst ravages of the virus and those working on the frontline – setting each different group apart. Is proper empathy across these **walls** possible?

Will it be possible to overcome processes of splitting to build on other, more constructive forces, mobilised by the pandemic? For instance, there has been a quiet digital revolution that has brought **walls** down in a positive way, expanding virtual meeting spaces and relationships. Can this herald a new future of greater connectedness? How will the tension between the intimacy of the ‘local’ and the seemingly limitless potential of the ‘global’ play out?

How does all of this impact on the way in which we think about ourselves in relation to our world/nature, our professional activities, and our engagement as citizens? Can the pandemic be a stimulus for thinking in a different way – for instance about global warming, and a more ethical and sustainable economy – or will powerful and unseen forces working towards the return of the repressed prevail?

This first online PCCA conference will create a virtual space in which issues like these can be considered in depth. It is a 4-day, experiential event which will use PCCA’s adapted form of the Group Relations method, developed further to take into account the online setting. It aims to enable participants to supplement their existing views on these matters with observations of what goes on beneath the surface, including their own emotional experience and dynamics that emerge within and between groups.

We hope that this conference can be of interest to participants from Europe and all over the world and their many ‘voices’ can allow an exploration and a better understanding of the very challenging times we are living in and that we must cope with.

This Conference is directed by Louisa Diana Brunner

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