

Testimony/ Bearing Witness

Current Controversies and Historical Perspectives

International Conference organized by the DFG-sponsored research project
“Testimony/ Bearing Witness” (“Zeugenschaft”),
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Institute of Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin / Center for Literary and Cultural
Research

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As key figures in cultural and epistemological practices, *testimony* and *bearing witness* have lately turned into prominent and controversial concepts that affect both the current debates in the humanities, and cultural sciences research. In sometimes disparate discourses we find varying approaches to these concepts, which transport seemingly incommensurate claims: On the one hand (predominantly in discourses of epistemology and law), testimony is seen as a reliable source of knowledge, as a piece of evidence promising objectivity. On the other hand (for instance in the testimonies of holocaust survivors or of survivors of other forms of genocide and extreme violence), bearing witness carries with it ethical and theoretical reflections in terms of memory and history: What is the relevance and what are the consequences of such singular experiences that cannot be accessed otherwise?

When dealing with the different domains and phenomena of bearing witness today– for instance, juridical or forensic testifying as opposed to historical testimony, or the bearing witness of survivors – we are invariably looking at diverse epistemological ambitions and methodological trajectories. At one end of the scale there is an interest to approach the idea systematically, with the goal to define, eventually, a general concept of bearing witness as “knowledge-through-others”; at the other end there is a pronounced skepticism towards the viability of such universalizing definitions, combined with the desire to make figures of bearing witness truly accessible by tracing their manifold sources in religion and cultural history.

This conference is designed to provide more than just a patchwork panorama of case studies and theoretical talks by specialists of the various fields. Rather, we aim to channel the debate on bearing witness and giving testimony towards especially those aspects that appear precarious and controversial: What are the chances and limits of communicating epistemological and ethical, philosophical and cultural-historical, past and present perspectives on the phenomenon and concept of bearing witness.