

Colonial Violence and the Alienation of Indigenous Children

This conference will take place as part of a research project named “Indigenous peoples and educational violence”, launched by the IFJD (Francophone Institute for Justice and Democracy) in 2023. This project has already led to the publication of a report on Indian homes in French Guyana handed over to the French parliament, and pleading in favour of the establishment of a truth commission to investigate the many abuses suffered by Kali’na children in these institutions. The research group brings together a wide range of academics and experts (law experts, historians, anthropologists, etc.). Its primary goal was to identify geographic areas where educational violence against Indigenous peoples did occur or still occurs. The researchers drafted detailed factsheets for each country and identified the type of violence perpetrated, the political context in which it occurred, the trauma it engendered as well as the restorative processes and policies implemented or demanded. That first instalment of the project, combining fieldwork with research, will lead to the publication of a book in late 2025. The upcoming conference, which is organized jointly by the IFJD and three research units, ALTER (UR 7504) IE2IA (UMR 7318) and CLIMAS (EA4196), purports to further the debates over policies targeting Indigenous children in colonial territories and settler states.

The removal of Aboriginal children from their families to assimilate, and often deculturate them, took many forms. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008-2015) raised public awareness about the way Indigenous education policies were often meant to serve the interests of the colonizers. Residential schools, mission schools and homes for Aboriginal children pursued the same objectives—isolating Indigenous children from their native cultures, converting them to the religion of the colonizer, forcing them to speak the so-called dominant language and adopt the values of the colonizing culture, and destroying traditional epistemologies and spiritual systems. In other instances, Indigenous children were not sent to residential schools but taken away and placed into non-Indigenous foster homes or families, or put up for adoption into non-Indigenous families.

When discussing education as a means to assert colonial power over Aboriginal populations, researchers often refer to the Indian Residential Schools of Canada or the Indian Boarding Schools of the United States, as both systems have received significant media coverage over the past few years. However, similar schemes can be found on all continents:

- in the Americas (in Canada and the United States, but also Peru, Surinam, Brazil, Ecuador and French Guyana for instance);
- in Africa (Botswana and Sierra Leone among others);
- in Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia and West Papua);
- in Asia (The Philippines, India, Malaysia, China, Turkey and Siberia, to name but a few);

- in Europe (Sweden, Norway, Finland and in the Kola peninsula of European Russia).

It would thus seem that policies targeting Indigenous children to assert colonial dominance occurred on a broad scale and in various contexts (colonies, settler states, decolonized states replicating colonial violence on minority groups). This conference will favour a cross-disciplinary approach to issues performing a vital function in the empowerment of Indigenous communities today. It will not only examine “educational” violence in diverse geographic areas, but it will also foster discussions between people with hands-on experience of these issues (activists, social workers, lawyers, and such) and researchers in various academic fields. This might allow to bring out similarities and differences in the strategies implemented to destroy Indigenous peoples by targeting the younger generations. Finally, the conference will also promote comparative approaches as to how Indigenous peoples have managed to resist silencing and annihilation.

Presentations may focus on topics such as:

- the types of violence perpetrated and the mechanisms allowing colonial expansion;
- the role of political, religious and social structures in perpetrating and perpetuating colonial violence through “education” (treaties, role of law enforcement officials, role of institutional systems, legislation allowing violence, role of court systems and child welfare systems, involvement of religious groups in Indigenous education, etc.);
- processes aimed at dehumanizing and “disindigenizing” children (physical, psychological, and sexual abuses; symbolical or discursive violence);
- medical experiments carried out on Indigenous children;
- tensions between the political objectives set and budgets allocated to Indigenous education and their consequences (malnourishment, ill-treatment, diseases, accidents, poor academic records, etc.);
- consequences of such policies on tribal identities, and collective and self-esteem as a member of an Indigenous group (shame, rejection and displacement of one’s cultural identity, exclusion from one’s native community, etc.);
- tension between assimilation policies and the absence of opportunities for Indigenous children to feel included into mainstream society;
- intergenerational trauma and consequences of Indigenous education policies (type, mechanisms, lasting impact, recovery);
- agency and activism (role of boarding schools in the emergence of Indigenous activism, creation of organizations and associations campaigning for the recognition of the colonial violence exerted on Aboriginal children and demanding structural change to prevent future colonial violence from occurring;

- systems aimed at providing compensation for or ensuring recognition of this violence (TRCs, commissions, expert panels, parliamentary inquiries, compensation systems, commemorative initiatives, etc.);
- achievements and limits of restorative and compensation measures;
- measures aimed at ensuring non-repetition of colonial violence (decolonisation of Indigenous education as well as of social and political systems);
- function of art and culture in the survivance of tribal identities and in resisting hegemonic and marginalizing discourses;
- sovereignty and self-determination as applied to Indigenous education;
- Indigenous education and local legislation (at a national level) and/or the role of international laws and conventions as applied by the states where such violence occurred (UNDRIP, ILO convention, UNICEF convention, etc.).

Date of the event: October 22-23-24 2026.

Place: Pau (France).

Submission guidelines: Proposals for papers should be approximately 300 words long and must include a short bibliography as well as a short biographical note. The deadline for submissions is October 20th 2025. Please send proposals to the three organizers:

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Panel proposals are also welcome.

Conference languages: Presentations may be in French, English, Spanish or Portuguese. Presentations in Indigenous languages are also welcome provided the speaker supplies a detailed abstract in French or in English.