

The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy  
Podcast Season 2, Episode 14  
Podcast recording date: March 30, 2021  
Host-producer: Azalia Muchransyah  
Speakers: Ellen Dussourd, Roger Des Forges, Shaun Irlam  
Contact information: [baldycenter@buffalo.edu](mailto:baldycenter@buffalo.edu)

Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]

Hi, everyone! Welcome to the season 2 of The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy Podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. I am your host and producer, Azalia Muchransyah. Today's podcast is a discussion about the Alison Des Forges Memorial Committee. The organization works for peace and justice in the memory of Alison Des Forges. Our three guests have been involved with the organization for over a decade. Roger Des Forges, co-founder of the group, is UB Professor Emeritus in History. Co-chair of the committee is Ellen Dussourd, who recently retired from UB after serving as Assistant Vice Provost and Director of International Student and Scholar Service. And we also have co-chair Shaun Irlam, who is a Professor and current Department Chair of the UB Afrikana and American Studies Program. Thank you all for joining us today.

Can you please provide an overview of the Alison Des Forges Committee's work?

[Ellen]

Our committee has a dual mission. One is to raise awareness of human rights in western New York and the other is to raise funds for an endowed scholarship to be awarded to graduates of Buffalo public schools who have an interest in human rights and social justice. So to that end, we do engage in a lot of fundraising. We have an annual donor appeal, we have a scholarship dinner to which we invite award donors each Spring. And, as I mentioned before, we work to mentor our scholarship awardees.

We raise awareness of human rights in western New York through our symposia, primarily. But the symposia also involve a community breakfast, to which we invite members of the Buffalo community who are working on, for example, women's human rights or refugee issues or have an academic issue and interest in our topic. So we invite them to the community breakfast.

[Azalia]

Why should people be interested in the symposia?

[Roger]

I think people should be interested in symposia because they deal with existential questions in our current world. And unless we understand where we are and how we got here we're not going to be very successful in shaping the future so that the planet continues to be a viable home of our species and many other species. So, we are driven by current events in a sense. Obviously, this year we're going to be looking at COVID-19 and that has limitations because the topic is unfolding and it's hard to know what's going to happen from one day to the next. But on the other hand it should be interesting to many

people who might not be interested in other elements of human rights. But this is really a question of survival. And unless we get it right, we won't be around to recount the history.

[Azalia]

How are the themes chosen each year?

[Shaun]

It comes out of proposals from members of the committee. Usually almost immediately after the current symposium, we're busy brainstorming about what we should address next. And we have some long-term themes or topics that we are hoping to explore and kind of keeping on the back burner. But then we're also constantly sort of monitoring contemporary headlines: what has emerged almost as sort of an informal slogan for the committee is that we take you behind the headlines and provide more perspective depth detail on current events. Usually events that aren't being well addressed in the national media because they are events happening in other parts of the world. And, regrettably the American news media is notoriously parochial. So, if something important is happening in Senegal or Indonesia or, you know, Paraguay, it's unlikely that you're going to get much coverage of it in the, you know, in national media.

So, you know, often we're just responding to contemporary headlines. And then members of the community will say why don't we explore this in the context of human rights? So, most notably, for example now, we're this semester doing the COVID-19 pandemic and how that is impacting issues around human rights and access to viable health care and all of those sorts of things. People on the committee will make proposals and we'll kind of bandy them about and discuss them amongst ourselves and usually something slowly catalyzes and takes shape out of those conversations.

[Azalia]

How do you select the participants?

[Ellen]

We do a lot of research to find speakers. The first step is Roger contacts Ken Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, to find out who in that organization is working on our topic. Our committee members identify potential speakers from their publications, from their conference presentations. We go online and we look at the think tank lists of experts to find individuals whose work relates to the theme of our symposium. We do the same thing with universities with strong departments in our area of focus. So, universities with strong, strong Africana Studies Departments. We contact public intellectuals whom we hear on NPR. And, in the end, what works best we find is, we find a few people in the field who then direct us to their academic and professional colleagues all over the world.

Sometimes it's easy. When we organize a symposium on China and Africa, Roger very quickly found publications on that topic and contacted the authors and put together a very strong roster of symposium speakers. Sometimes it's tough. One year, when we organized our symposium on climate change we wanted to have a scientific panel and we were unable to find anyone who would agree to come. Any scientists who would agree to come and speak.

[Azalia]

Do the participants publish work relating to the symposium?

[Roger]

Uh, yes, certainly they do. And, of course, reading their work is what leads us to them in many cases. And after the symposium also these presenters continue to write. We try to keep in touch with them and with their scholarship. That said, we don't have a strong focus on publication as a criterion for coming to speak or as a result of having spoken. We want to emphasize oral and immediate ideas, orally expressed and recorded and now we also are able to put the proceedings on our website. And, so we are making available to a very large audience. Much larger than in the past. Without having to go through the whole process of peer review and publication, which sometimes takes years. So things are speeded up, more efficient. And we're happy to have this happen to our work.

[Azalia]

What are the common threads over the nine years?

[Shaun]

The most prominent is of course the centrality of Africa. To try and keep Africa and developments in Africa in the conversation whatever the topic. Whether it is, you know, refugees. Whether it's immigration. Whether it is Islamicization. Whether it is the advancement of China's economic policies, human trafficking issues, climate change. Because this was the continent that Alison devoted her life to. And so to celebrate that legacy, we try to keep the focus on Africa. I think that's the most significant thread that binds together everything that we've done.

And then secondly of course is the constant emphasis also on the human rights implications in all of these instances. How are human rights affected, how are they impacted, by all of these different kinds of social phenomena, conflicts, movements, etc, etc. And, again, that is just consistent with the kind of work that Alison was engaged in throughout her career as a Senior Researcher for Human Rights Watch in the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

The third issue is, of course, the topicality. We are constantly alert to current headlines and particularly issues that we feel are not being addressed in national media with sufficient nuance, complexity, context, historical background. And that's something I think that our symposium can always provide.

Finally, the, perhaps the most obvious theme of all is that all of these symposia are designed to honor Alison Des Forges' legacy. So she is always the implicit guest of honor in all of these events. And, indeed, it's remarkable how many of our guests over the years have paid tribute to Alison in the course of their presentations, their remarks. So she's always kind of there as a guest of honor in these gatherings. Those are the sort of principal common characteristics and hallmarks of these events.

[Azalia]

What are a few highlights of presentations from past symposia?

[Roger]

Well, Shaun mentioned the focus on Africa. And I don't think he mentioned by name, but Howard French, who is a leading writer on Africa. An influential writer and has written two books on China in

Africa. And it was quite remarkable to have him. He came to two of our symposia, talk about his approach to doing research in Africa. Which is very much from the ground up. And he spent enough time in China to know enough Chinese that he could use Chinese and he has some African languages, I believe. And he really gets into local society and makes himself part of the scenery., and writes very compellingly about the issues. So he's a non-academic who does extremely important work for academics to learn from. So that would be one highlight, I think and there are many others that I could, that I could talk about.

[Ellen]

Yeah, it's difficult to talk about highlights. Because all of our symposium speakers have been excellent. And I've learned so much from each symposium. But as Shaun mentioned we choose topics that are current. But we try to take our audience behind the headlines into the nuances and the complexities of issues. And when one does that, the results are often counterintuitive. And one example that has stayed with me was a talk that was given by Professor Kathman of UB's Department of Political Science. And this was during our symposium on Islam, Islamism, and human rights in Africa. He spoke on the rationality of abusing civilians in civil war. And the idea that abusing civilians could be a deliberate strategy was a new one to me and it seemed counterintuitive. But in struggling with a central government and a military, doing so can strengthen the hand in negotiating with the military and with the government. And that was, Professor Kathman detailed how insurgent groups use violence to attempt to achieve their objectives.

[Azalia]

What were some of the challenges or things that surprised you?

[Ellen]

In my experience of organizing events over a few decades, I've learned that each event has its own personality. There's always something surprising that occurs that one needs to respond to quickly. So one thing we've learned is that it can take months of inviting many speakers to finalize a roster of speakers or it can happen very quickly. So, for one symposium we invited 23 speakers before we achieved our desired number. In another case, almost everyone we invited initially accepted. This year, for the first time we had someone withdraw seven weeks before the symposium. So I would say that the challenges of organizing symposia are: be prepared for the unexpected. You don't know what might happen and you have to be able to respond quickly. So we had to find a replacement speaker in a couple of weeks, which was something we had not had to do before.

[Azalia]

Can you tell us about your first online symposium event last fall and what did you learn from it?

[Shaun]

That was a very interesting learning experience. It was late into the planning of our Spring symposium that it became clear to us that it wasn't going to happen because we were going to be shut down and no international travel would be occurring. And so of course we had to postpone the event. And then realize that we would have to post it online. And so our committee members, you know, none of us are sort of very technically savvy, you know. Least of all me. But I, you know, foolishly volunteered to be one

of the two people that would try and manage the platform. And, so, over the summer it involved kind of meeting with Ellen and Roger and anticipating how this would be structured. What would we do to prevent unruly audience members gate crashing our, our event. It's, you know, all those sorts of things.

I, along with Ndubueze Mbah, who's a Professor in the History Department, he was my co-host. So we figured out a kind of a distribution of labor. And, so, I was the principal host for the call. And, you know, had to create breakout rooms where our guests could assemble separately from the audience. That was something new to me. And then figure out how to get them into the general auditorium as it were. My colleague Bueze was monitoring the chat feed so that he could pick up all the questions that were accumulating during the presentations. There were a few glitches. I can remember we had a colleague from Hong Kong who had a PowerPoint that involved some short video clips. And a few slides into the presentation everybody was seeing the PowerPoint but they weren't getting any audio from the clips. So I had to stop and intervene and try and figure out why it wasn't feeding audio. And once I'd reset the audio it started the PowerPoint right back at the beginning again.

So it was, it was things like that but I mean, by and large, I think it went surprisingly smoothly given, you know, that this was our first time managing an event like this. We were anxious, of course, also that because we had guests dialing in from all over the planet. I think we even had people based in Sudan. Given my familiarity with what internet connections are often like in Africa, we were concerned that we should have everybody's presentation at least available to us as a separate recording up front. Because we were worried about somebody's feed just, you know, glitching or stalling or freezing. At the end of the day, it really went remarkably smoothly. And we had all of these international guests. We had somebody in Georgia. Not Georgia in the South, but the Former-Soviet Georgia in the Caucasus. Folks in the Sudan. And, um, I think, you know, a couple of people in the UK. Yeah, it went really well. We got a good audience attendance. Q&A went very smoothly. Again, handled by Professor Mbah. So I was very satisfied with how it all panned out. But I think it was mostly thanks to Ellen's prescient planning about what could and couldn't go wrong with this event. And anticipating all the things we needed to think about ahead of time.

[Azalia]

Can you please tell us about your 2021 symposium?

[Ellen]

Our topic this year is the pandemic. But of course people have been deluged with discussion of the pandemic for over a year now. After deciding to choose this topic, we thought about what we have to offer that perhaps no one else is offering. One was we wanted to be able to provide a lot of concrete information about how other countries are responding to the pandemic. In particular, countries and regions of the world that are doing a better job than the US has done. And the other was we wanted to respond to the demonization of WHO that one heard coming from the Trump administration. So we wanted to focus on, on international cooperation.

So we're going to have three panels. The first one will focus on East Asia's response to the pandemic. Of course the virus originated in China, but China got it under control much more quickly than the United States has done. We're going to have a speaker from Hong Kong who's going to do a comparison of how the PRC responded to the pandemic and how Hong Kong did. We're also going to have a speaker from

Korea and he's going to be talking about Korea's response to the pandemic. And as I think we know from media, East Asian countries had had some experience under their belts because they had to respond to SARS and that benefited, uh, Korea as well.

We have another speaker from Johns Hopkins who, who wrote an article titled From Sick Man... To Sick Men of America, something like that. At noon, over the noon hour, we're going to have a round table. And this is going to be led by Julia Hall, who works for Amnesty International at their International Secretariat in London. But she's a human rights lawyer based in Buffalo and she's going to lead a roundtable discussion involving the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Counterterrorism and someone from Amnesty International who previously worked for WHO. And they're going to be discussing the response to the pandemic, international cooperation from both sides. Both positive collaboration that leads to, for example, an effective rollout of vaccines. But also negative cooperation, where countries use the pandemic to suppress opposition, for example.

The third panel is going to focus on Africa. And Africa mounted a very effective response in many countries because they drew on prior experience in responding to Ebola and HIV AIDS. And we have speakers who are going to focus on that aspect. In addition, we have one speaker who's going to talk about COVAX, TRIPS, and AstraZeneca. And how those issues have impacted the rollout of vaccines on the ground.

[Azalia]

When reflecting on the past symposia what are the main takeaways?

[Roger]

I would say that the need to address and redress what I'm calling existential crises. Including social, economic, gender, and racial inequities. This need, it seems to me, emerges from all of these symposia and we need to continue to focus on them. Also, I think, more recently, even after we started planning this symposium, we have evidence of a continuing and growing the US military-industrial complex. And renewed, uh, calls for a kind of cold war with Russia and China.

These are trends which are extremely dangerous because the complex essentially feeds itself by creating crises. And it seems that this need for a foreign enemy continues to be so important even for the Democratic party, which hopefully would have alternatives to what we've had for the last four years. But most recent press releases coming out of the Pentagon and coming out of other sources suggest that we really are entering another period when we're going to have a clear foreign enemy. And of course Islam has served that function quite well as well, recently, but I think the fear of China is going to be a major issue we're going to have to address in our future symposium.

[Shaun]

I would say there's the main takeaways for me have just been constantly reminded of the sort of the absolute fragility of democratic institutions and human rights in the global context. Last fall, we had Professor Mettler from Cornell University who kind of took us through some of the challenges to democracy even here in the United States. So that is, you know, reminded that as much as we take democracy and democratic institutions and human rights for granted in the West and at least have done so, the past decade, at least have provided us a very sobering insight into how quickly those institutions

can be eroded. And that's been deeply alarming to me to sort of see the rise of authoritarian impulses in countries that one once believed were, you know, the very bastions of human rights and democratic institutions, and freedom of the press, personal freedom, etc.

And the United States, of course, has emerged. We're seeing the erosion of the voting rights act in this country as an access to voting as we speak. And it just feels like there's an extraordinary rollback of human rights and democratic freedoms that is taking place all over the planet. And authoritarian leaders in the rest of the world are deeply emboldened by what they're seeing in the West. Because they figure, well, even the West, you know, don't seem to care too much about democracy anymore. So that's something that, you know, these annual symposia have constantly shine the kind of spotlight on for me and these have just been very, very sobering events in that respect.

But I would say a second sort of more cheerful takeaway has been what is unique about these symposia is the way in which it brings together people within academia and people within the activist community, people in NGOs and non-academic, human rights organizations, and so on. Because that is an extremely rare experience for somebody who lives in academia, you know. I've been to countless conferences where you talk to other academics. And so these events, you know, as I say break down that boundary between what happens inside the academy and what happens in the world of NGOs and activist organizations, like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch. And, also, these events bring together an academic audience with a non-academic audience because our symposia are all free and open to the general public. And they attract members from the local community. And, you know, one consequence of that has been to recognize the depth of interest and expertise that exists here in uh western New York and also at UB. Sort of been a very sort of satisfying part of the involvement in these symposia.

And then I'd say the third thing is just the international character of these symposia, too, that they've always included a very generous sampling of scholars from elsewhere on the planet. Or people with deep experience of other parts of the world. Particularly, again, regions of Africa that most people are not familiar with. So those have just been some of the general characteristics that have been really valuable to me in participating in the past symposia.

[Azalia]

How do UB students, faculty, and alumni benefit from the symposia?

[Roger]

Well, students can benefit in a couple of ways. One is they can be aware of the existence of this scholarship that we offer each year. A four-year scholarship they can apply. There's only one scholarship and there are many, many students. So there are quite a few students who say, you know, certainly my chances are small. They are small. We have to recognize that. On the other hand, this scholarship is quite large. So it might be worth trying even if it looks like the chances are not good. Students can also benefit, of course, by attending the symposia. And they can benefit now because we have them on video so these videos are going to be available to classroom teachers to use in courses. And that's already happening.

Faculty can benefit, of course, by interacting with their colleagues from other campuses and schools around the country and the world who come to town. And local faculty, I think, also want to play important roles in organizing and moderating the discussions. We want them to be able to use the

proceedings of the symposia to broaden their own perspectives to a global arena. And alumni can now more easily attend the symposium now that they're going to be online. So, basically, the benefits, I think, are considerable. And we're grateful to those who have contributed to our fund which enables us to bring in these speakers. We are able to award small honoraria to the speakers, but I think they're coming not for the honoraria but for the interaction with other scholars whom they respect.

And I would say along with what Shaun was saying and also been saying: it's not just academics who come to present. We have people and it's not just NGO people either. It's also people in positions of authority, policy makers. And we want them to feel welcome. And we also want them to be in some cases enlightened by the proceedings.

[Azalia]

How did support from The Baldy Center help sustain nine years of symposia?

[Roger]

The Baldy Center has been one of the most generous and consistent supporters of our symposia. Basically, the memorial fund is able to cover the major expenses through our fundraising in society at large outside the university. We have a fair number of strong supporters of what we're doing. So The Baldy Center has been, on campus, one of the three or four most generous contributors. So we're very grateful for that.

[Ellen]

I would like to echo what Roger just said. The Baldy Center has been our most generous and most consistent supporter. And it is because of the support that we receive from UB entities, such as The Baldy Center, that we are able to cover the costs of our symposium. A virtual symposium is less expensive than an in-person symposium because we're not paying for international airfare or housing or meals. But our expenses are considerable when we hold an in-person symposium, because we fly in speakers from Africa, from Asia, and from Europe.

[Azalia]

What are the Alison Des Forges committee's plan for future symposia?

[Shaun]

Well, as I said when, I think, we were talking about one of the earlier topics. The suggestions for future symposia kind of bubble up spontaneously from members of the committee. My expectation is that in 2014, we had a symposium organized around the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. So, my expectation is that perhaps 2024 will be a time to have a sort of 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary symposium around that topic. Our colleague Satpal Singh is very deeply involved in issues around gendered violence against women. And I anticipate that very soon we'll be organizing a symposium around that topic. Uh, one topic that has been circulating amongst us for the last couple of years but has been constantly sort of upstaged again by contemporary headlines is a symposium around genocide and the arts. How artistic creativity responds to genocide, genocide culture, and so on. And that's certainly a symposium that I look forward to being involved in, because it lies very close to my own field of research.

That's just a kind of a very casual gaze into the crystal ball to see what might be coming up down the road. But, as I say, the decision about which topics to pursue evolve out of conversation amongst ourselves usually once we've kind of put the previous symposium behind it, we then have the mental space or the mental bandwidth to start thinking about what we should do next. So that's typically how it works.

[Ellen]

I would just add that we also ask our past speakers for suggestions of symposium topics as well as suggestions of speakers.

[Azalia]

Are you going to continue with the virtual or hybrid format after the pandemic ends?

[Ellen]

Absolutely. I think we would not want to lose the advantages of a virtual audience and the reach that hosting our symposium of on Zoom offers. And we will be learning from others how they take advantage of the benefits of Zoom and how they utilize them in their future programming.

[Azalia]

That was Roger Des Forges, Ellen Dussourd, and Shaun Irlam from the Alison Des Forges Memorial Committee and this has been The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy Podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. To learn more about the Alison des Forges memorial committee, please visit our website [buffalo.edu/baldycenter](http://buffalo.edu/baldycenter). And you can also find more of our podcast episodes there. Also, don't forget to follow us on twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer, Azalia Muchransyah.

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