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Agonistic Interventions into Public Commemorative Art: An Innovative Form of Counter-memorial Practice?

Abstract

In light of recent controversies around the removal or modification of public commemorative art, such as memorials and monuments, this paper interrogates the value of competing approaches to counter-memorial practice using the framework of agonistic memory. It argues that much counter-memorial practice today, as it relates to historical memory, is dominated by a “cosmopolitan” mode that fails to offer a convincing response to the rise of right-wing populism and its instrumentalization of conflicts over public commemorative art. The article investigates two case studies of counter-memorial interventions that focus on the memory of fascism in Europe today and seeks to identify and assess emergent agonistic practices.

Introduction

Public monuments and memorials, which are erected in the urban environment in order to commemorate significant historical events and personalities, have been recognized by scholars as sites at which hegemonic understandings of the past are reinforced (Saunders, 2018: p. 33). They constitute symbols of “public memory” (Bodnar, 1993) and can take on the function of significant *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), giving concrete form to dominant conceptions of national history and identity. Given the resources that must be mobilized to create them, both monetary and political, such forms of public commemorative art (as we will term them here) have been acknowledged as a means by which “those with political power

within a given society organize public space to convey (and thus teach the public) desired political lessons” (Levinson, 2018: 7). This hegemonic function of public commemorative art is most often associated with the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which emerging bourgeois democracies in capitalist nation states sought to establish the dominance of their values in an explosion of “statuomania” (Michalski, 1998: pp. 13–55).

In stark contrast, the late 20th century and early 21st centuries have been marked by a shift towards memorial practices that seek to move away from avowedly heroic understandings of national identity, for example by acknowledging the victims of historical crimes perpetrated in the name of the nation. The most famous example of this is undoubtedly the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, but Germany is not alone in acknowledging past atrocities in this way (cf. Williams, 2007). Equally, Doss (2010) identifies a trend towards the construction of new forms of public commemorative art that seek to acknowledge previously marginalized groups, often focusing more on past suffering than on the achievements or victories. Such demands for memorialization have gone hand-in-hand with forms of identity politics and demands for the recognition of rights in the present.

In a parallel development, activists have sought solutions to the presence of commemorative art in the urban landscape that celebrates values no longer deemed to be representative of the community. Such counter-memorial practice, as we will discuss in more detail below, generally involves the critical augmentation of an original memorial by artistic means. More recently, however, this broadly progressive agenda has in some cases adopted the strategy of seeking to remove existing forms of public commemorative art that express values antithetical to equality and diversity. Such controversies (in contexts as diverse as the American South, the UK, Germany and South Africa) have the capacity to turn relatively “cold” monuments, which may well have become taken for granted as part of the urban

landscape, into “hot monuments” (Bellentani & Panico 2016: p. 34) that are sites of public contestation and, in some cases, potentially violent confrontation.

In this article, we will seek to analyze emergent alternatives for the management of such conflicts over public commemorative art that challenge both established forms of counter-memorial practice and calls for the removal of problematic public commemorative art. The analysis will be based on two key case studies: the South-Tyrolean city of Bolzano, centered around a fascist building and a fascist monument, which have been augmented with art installations and a new exhibition; and the response of a German art-activist collective, the Centre for Political Beauty, to verbal attacks by right-wing populists on Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, commonly known as the Holocaust Memorial. These case studies make for an instructive contrast: the former focuses on a fascist monument challenged by contemporary progressives, whereas the latter relates to a memorial commemorating the victims of fascism challenged by the contemporary populist right. In examining these two case studies, we will critically engage with the notion of “agonistic memory” as it has been developed by Cento Bull and Hansen (2016), with reference to the work of Chantal Mouffe. We will explore how a variety of actors (from artists and museum-makers to civil society activists) have developed interventions in which we can observe the emergence of moments of what we will call “agonistic” practice. While pointing out the benefits of such practice in terms of the maintenance of a democratic political culture, we will also show how such agonistic moments nevertheless exist within a wider landscape of counter-memorials that continue to operate within a dominant “cosmopolitan” mode, as set out below. We will also demonstrate that, while moments of agonistic counter-memorialization may be strategically useful under circumstances, there are still logistical hurdles to the implementation of full-blown agonistic approaches to monuments and memorials, and that need to be taken into consideration by theorists and practitioners. Specifically, we will argue that, although

agonistic interventions around contested monuments by means of artwork can play an important role in deconstructing the hegemonic memory regime and eliciting thought-provoking reactions among viewers, the construction of a counter-hegemonic collective reimagining needs to rely on sustained socio-cultural practices and discourses, which foreground radical multiperspectivism as defined by agonistic memory theory. In this way, our analysis also contributes to the ongoing debate over the applicability of the concept of agonistic memory to the management of difficult pasts in a range of cultural and social contexts (e.g. De Angeli, Finnegan, Scott, Bull and O'Neill 2018; Reynolds and Blair 2018; Cento Bull, Hansen, Kansteiner and Parish 2019; Ferrándiz 2019).

Defining Agonistic Counter-Memorial Practices

In order to contextualize our discussion of agonistic interventions, it will be necessary to distinguish such practices from the notion of the “counter-monument” or “counter-memorial” that has already been widely discussed by scholars, and which we understand as expressive of a cosmopolitan memory frame. Cento Bull and Hansen (2016) define cosmopolitan memory as primarily victim-focused, promoting a consensus around values such as human rights and post-national identity through empathy with the suffering of victims of historic crimes committed in the name of the nation. Although there is no clear and widely used definition of the counter-memorial in the relevant literature, researchers have broadly identified two types of counter-memorial or counter-monumental practice (Stevens, Franck & Fazakerley 2012) that can be understood in relation to cosmopolitan memory.

The first of these, as James E. Young (1992) has argued, tends to challenge the aesthetic vocabulary of canonical 19th century public commemorative art, in terms of its rejection of heroism in favor of a focus on victims, its abstract or non-representational

strategies, and its refusal of architectural monumentality. These are therefore forms of public art “that are specifically intended to challenge monuments’ conventional tropes of scale and celebration” (Osborne, 2017: p. 165), an approach that fits within the cosmopolitan memory frame. The examples that Young addresses are memorials to the victims of the Holocaust, which is the key point of reference for cosmopolitan memory culture, but it is the formal aspects of these memorials that reinforce their cosmopolitan intent. In refusing to provide a direct representation of suffering with a clear-cut message, these abstract memorials, as Young (1992: p. 277) argues, “refuse to graciously accept the burden of memory but [...] throw it back at the [...] feet” of the viewer, understood in terms of a community that must continue to bear the weight of the history in question. One might add that their refusal of direct representation also underlines the unrepresentable nature of the horror of the victims’ experience, to which the counter-memorial can only gesture.

The second variety of cosmopolitan counter-memorial adopts a dialogic strategy in relation to existing monuments and memorials that are deemed to be ideologically or aesthetically problematic. Dinah Wijsenbeek (2010: p. 266) understands the counter-memorial as a fundamentally didactic and pedagogic enterprise, in which the unacceptable world-view informing one piece of public art is undermined by a related work that reveals those aspects of history (e.g. human suffering, the consequences of militarism and nationalism) that the former silences.

The examples that Wijsenbeek draws on are almost exclusively monuments and memorials associated with German militarism and National Socialism, whose ideological premises it is surely appropriate to call into question. However, the mechanism of counter-monumentality proposed here in dialogic guise is one in which the historical existence of a dangerous ideology is acknowledged while simultaneously assigning to the viewers the role of those who distance themselves from that ideology. As Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen

(2016) observe of cosmopolitan memory, this strategy leaves unanswered more difficult questions about the attraction of the ideology expressed in the original monument, both in the past and the present, positing in its place a consensual approach to history in which a positive appreciation of democratic values, based on empathy for the “other”, is assumed to be the norm.

The desire for an ultimately consensual outcome is shared by a third variety of counter-memorial practice, namely by those who demand the removal of public commemorative art. However, in these approaches we can observe an antagonistic rather than a cosmopolitan logic at work. An antagonistic stance, in the sense that Chantal Mouffe has proposed, sees the existence of the other whose values and identity are expressed in the public sphere as those of an enemy who “put[s] into question the identity of the ‘we’ and [...] threaten[s] its existence” (Mouffe 2005: p. 17). The removal of public commemorative art that is deemed to embody such values is therefore a tactic to establish the hegemonic representation of one’s own identity in the public sphere.

In examining our chosen case studies, we offer a new definition of agonistic counter-memorial practices. While the term intervention as used here has evolved particularly in the practice of artists working in museums, who introduce new work into a space in which material heritage is normally deployed in the interests of maintaining the hegemonic social order (Carroll La 2011), agonistic counter-memorial interventions tend to involve multiple activities, ranging from the artistic and the museal to the participatory and the performative. However, in the current memory culture of Western Europe, in which a cosmopolitan memory frame in relation to fascism, the Second World War and the Holocaust predominates, we will note how agonistic practices tend to emerge in the context of other more cosmopolitan interventions, even to the extent that such practices are mobilized by actors whose attitude to remembering the past is primarily cosmopolitan. We will argue that

these glimpses of agonistic practice, although unstable, fleeting and sometimes non-programmatic, deserve our attention to the extent that they show us that counter-memorial practice is both possible and potentially productive outside of an increasingly routinised cosmopolitan frame.

As already stated, for our definition of agonism, we will draw on Mouffe's theory of the political. In doing so, we will ascertain whether her conception of political contestation can provide a more productive model for dealing with contemporary conflicts over public commemorative art, as outlined above. In order to answer this question, we will first consider the relationship of Mouffe's theory to these conflicts, before examining two recent multiple interventions that will help us to understand some of the possibilities that agonistic practice may afford.

Mouffe's Conception of Agonism and its Relevance to Memory Practice

Mouffe's theory of the political has emerged in a context characterized by significant challenges to the cosmopolitan politics of the post-Cold War period. Populist movements that mobilize nationalistic and racist rhetoric have sought since the global financial crisis of 2007, and the subsequent global recession, to roll back an apparent consensus in the West that favored globalization, the increasing porousness of national borders, the expression of hybrid identities and the equal treatment of minorities. The moral argument for this consensus was underpinned with references to Europe's dark past in the 20th century, stressing the need to move away from a history of nationalist rivalry and racism that culminated in the Second World War and, in particular, the Holocaust (Levy & Sznajder, 2006: pp. 126–127). This cosmopolitan memory discourse was espoused by a political mainstream that also sought to propagate a neoliberal consensus, in which the state could no longer act as a guarantor of

identity and prosperity, but could only create the conditions for its citizens to become competitive actors in a globalized economy (Cerny, 2007). In the wake of the collapse of state socialism in the former USSR and its satellite states, the neoliberal consensus on the retrenchment of the state, privatization of public services, the modification of the safety net of welfare state to encourage citizens' "self-reliance", the reduction of the tax burden for the wealthy and so on have come to be regarded as without alternative (Streeck, 2014). While centrist social-democratic parties have fallen in with this rhetoric, the success of right-wing populist parties, according to Mouffe (2005: p. 71), "comes from the fact that they articulate, albeit in a very problematic way, real democratic demands which are not taken into account by traditional parties".

Mouffe's definition of the political, for which she draws on the work of German conservative philosopher Carl Schmitt, is as an inherently conflictual realm, in which collective identities are constructed through the political relations between an "us" and a constitutive outside in the form of an "other". In Mouffe's terminology (2005: p. 5), an enemy is someone who is a threat to one's own existence and who must be fought uncompromisingly. In terms of political debate, an enemy is someone whose views are so dangerous that they must be silenced, by force if necessary. The solution, Mouffe believes, is to move beyond such antagonism towards (or, rather, back to) agonistic democracy. The condition for entry into agonistic competition is, therefore, that one recognizes others not as enemies, but rather as adversaries with a right to their position and to the expression of that position. In this way antagonism can be transformed into an agonism compatible with pluralist democracy (Mouffe, 2005: p. 20). However, those who make enemies of others and seek to silence and/or destroy them are placing themselves outside of the terms of agonistic debate. Agonistic politics therefore revolves around the struggles to establish a new hegemony through an adversarial dynamics of public contest and confrontation. In particular,

Mouffe (2013: 22) advocates relinquishing the idea that radical politics “consists in destruction and radical negation of tradition and that it requires exit from all institutions, political as well as artistic”. In her view, the role of artistic interventions is especially important. As she argues,

[b]y staging a confrontation between conflicting positions, museums and art institutions could make a decisive contribution to the proliferation of new public spaces open to agonistic forms of participation where radical democracy alternatives to neoliberalism could, once again, be imagined and cultivated. (Mouffe 2013: 22)

Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen (2016) have applied Mouffe’s model to the problem of historical memory, which is central to the issue of public commemorative art, and have proposed the concept of agonistic memory in order to overcome the shortcomings of both antagonistic and cosmopolitan discourses. They argue that, whereas cosmopolitan memory tends to decontextualize subjects and events, representing good and evil in moral and abstract terms, and antagonistic practices use selective memory to present a narrative of heroes vs. villains, agonistic memory tries to re-politicize the past and the relation of the past to the present by unsettling established identity positions and relations and also revealing the socio-political struggles for hegemony fought both historically and in the present. Both the agonistic and the cosmopolitan modes of remembering are self-reflective and conscious of the constructed nature of all identities, while antagonistic memory sees identities as essentialized and immutable. Furthermore, while agonistic memory recognizes the conflictive character of social relations, depicting the “other” as an enemy, and cosmopolitan memory views the world as potentially united in the recognition and protection of human rights, agonistic memory works towards establishing a “conflicting consensus”, in which contrasting

political projects confront and compete with each other. For this reason, agonistic memory discourse is radically multiperspectivist, while cosmopolitan memory is consensually multiperspectivist. In consensual multiperspectivism, multiple characters who typically differ in terms of gender, age, social and ethno-religious traits and beliefs, are able to voice their views, yet their stories fit into an overarching hegemonic narrative. In radical multiperspectivism, contrasting and even opposing viewpoints, including the perspectives of perpetrators, bystanders, traitors, as well as victims, confront each other in an open-ended manner, without being constrained to fit into an authoritative narrative. Cento Bull and Hansen (2016: 397) acknowledge that they are indebted to Bakhtin as much as Mouffe for their understanding of multiperspectivity, since “according to Bakhtin, a unified truth can only be expressed through a plurality of perspectives”. Of great relevance is also Bakhtin’s (1981: 301-312) approach to irony and humor, which can be used effectively to destabilize and subvert “authoritative discourse” (342–344).

Mouffe (2013: 85–105) ascribes to art the ability to open up a space of agonistic dialogue in which the struggle to shape the social order becomes apparent: hegemony becomes visible not just as a given, but as the outcome of a struggle between opposed political forces. While Mouffe tends to single out artistic interventions when she discusses agonistic cultural practices, we should in fact consider a very wide range of possibilities. Oral history/life histories, video games, guided tours, graffiti, public debates, use of satire and other interventions that do not simply artistically modify a statue or a monument but re-contextualize and re-politicize the past in relation to the present, can help promote agonistic encounters and reimagine democracy. This is especially the case with (dissonant) narratives and storytelling, which can challenge the binary divide of antagonistic memory and bring to life the socio-political conditions and interests capable of cutting across entrenched US/THEM identity positions. They can also avoid the pitfalls associated with agonistic

interventions that limit themselves to modifying a statue, as a kind of variation on the dialogic memorial discussed above. These potential problems have been identified by one critic of agonistic memory, who argues that “[w]e can modify statues to recognise historical truths, and to perform a kind of apology, but that’s as far as agonism goes. Given the now impossible-to-ignore continuity between the misdeeds of the past and the conditions people face in the present, this feels insufficient” (Stiem 2018). Contrary to such assumptions, however, agonistic memory theory, as we saw, does in fact fully acknowledge that the memory of past struggles for hegemony has a direct bearing upon present-day power relations and structural injustices. Indeed, by opening a dialogue and a debate around past and present injustices and the struggles around them, agonistic memory can help both to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and (re)construct alternative socio-political identities, alliances, and imaginings. In light of the above, the following sections will examine interventions around controversial public commemorative art in two European cities: the South-Tyrolean city of Bolzano-Bozen, centered around a fascist building and a fascist monument as well as a new exhibition; and responses to verbal attacks by right-wing populists on Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial.

These interventions tend on the whole to revolve around artistic works and installations and to remain within the frame of cosmopolitan memory. They can provoke and unsettle audiences, and also point to the emergence of practices that acknowledge their own contingency, not least their short-lived capacity to promote debate and controversy, and which for this reason are deliberately temporary in nature or are open to being modified themselves. Ultimately, however, they demonstrate a need to go beyond single individual interventions in favor of multiple, interrelated and sustained practices, which can contribute to the (re)construction of counter-hegemonic collective identities and the reimagining of

democratic alternatives by means of radical multiperspectivism, as opposed to simply deconstructing hegemonic discourses.

Between Cosmopolitanism and Agonism: ‘Critical Preservation’ of Two Fascist Monuments in Bolzano-Bozen

Unlike Germany, which was de-nazified to a significant extent after the war and later opted overwhelmingly for a cosmopolitan approach to its Nazi past, Italy underwent no comparable process of de-fascistization after 1945 and no systematic suppression of fascist symbols, monuments and statues. As Ben-Ghiat (2017) recently remarked, when Berlusconi embarked upon a revisionist strategy in the 1990s, “his rehabilitation of fascism was aided by an existing network of pilgrimage sites and monuments”. The issue of the aesthetic value of fascist modernist architecture has compounded the problem, by allowing a consensus to emerge that fascist monuments should be preserved for their artistic quality, thus depoliticizing or indeed ignoring their ideological and political message (Arthurs, 2010). Arthurs (2010: p. 125) asks whether such monuments should not instead be “critically preserved”, for instance “by inserting some form of explanation – as through labelling, panels or museum display”. Carter and Martin (2017) have also argued that the lack of “critical preservation” in Italy since the 1990s is deeply problematic, not least because it can be linked to the resurgence of “neo-patriotic, ‘anti-anti-fascist’ interpretations of the ventennio” (2017: p. 356). As Bartolini (2019) points out, the issue is complicated both by social and cultural attitudes, since most Italians do not seemingly feel threatened by these monuments and by the fact that the latter cannot be legally moved elsewhere or deprived of their symbols. Insofar as recent debates on the public memory of fascism are concerned, they are often aimed at rehabilitating fascism as opposed to stimulating critical reflection (Malone 2017). It is against

this background of historical revisionism, aesthetic revaluation of fascist architecture and de-politicization of what Mussolini and the regime stood for that we need to analyze the modifications brought to fascist monuments in the city of Bolzano-Bozen and appreciate their agonistic content, albeit mingled with obvious cosmopolitan traits.

Bolzano-Bozen is the capital of South Tyrol (Alto Adige for Italians), which was annexed to Italy after the First World War, despite the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants being German speakers. During the fascist regime, Mussolini started a policy of forced Italianization in the province, which including banning “the use of the German language in schools and in public” (Steinacher, 2011: p. 648). At the same time, Italians were encouraged to settle in the province and as a result Bolzano became a city with a majority of Italian-speaking residents. In October 1939, Nazi Germany agreed with fascist Italy that it would resettle most of the South Tyroleans, removing them to Germany, a policy that, when put to the vote in December 1939, obtained a resounding majority among German-speaking Tyroleans (Latour 1965). The policy was only partially implemented, however, until in 1943 it was superseded by the German occupation and administration of South Tyrol, lasting until 1945. During this period, power relations were overturned: the fascist party was outlawed and the German language was fully reinstated.

The harsh policy of Italianization and fascistization included modifying the built environment, with new buildings and monuments designed to symbolize the triumphant conquest of the territory by Mussolini. Among these was the Casa del fascio, built in 1939–1942 as the headquarters of the local fascist party, with the façade dominated by a huge bas-relief depicting Mussolini on horseback with his hand raised in the fascist salute and portraying the fascist motto “Believe, Obey, Fight” (Steinacher, 2011: p. 653). A monumental arch, known as the Victory Monument, designed by architect Marcello Piacentini and erected in 1928, replaced a previous Austro-Hungarian monument

commemorating fallen soldiers from the city. Built in white marble, the Victory monument incorporated fascist symbols, including giant fasces standing as columns and a Latin inscription that proclaimed the superiority of Latin culture over the uncivilized Germanic one, as it reads “Here at the fatherland’s border, plant the banners! From here we enlighten others with language, law and arts”. As Höckerberg (2017: p. 763) remarked, “[a]n earlier version of the text had included the word *barbaros*, but this was replaced by the less provocative *ceteros* (the others), to mitigate the insult against those German speakers who were now Italian citizens”. After the end of the war, these two buildings became the source of controversy and conflict. The Victory Monument, in particular, “has stoked the greatest tensions, particularly within the last thirty years, which have seen an escalation in polemics, protests and clashes” (Steinacher, 2013: p. 655), many of which targeted the monument itself. These included bombing attacks by Tyrolean activists, commemorative ceremonies and military celebrations performed by Italian nationalist and neofascist groups, protests by an anti-fascist left-wing and inter-ethnic alliance in favor of critical modifications to the monument and a clear-cut position by right-wing German groups demanding its destruction (Steinacher, 2011: p. 656; Obermair, 2017: p. 94).

Demonstrations and protest continued well into the 2000s. In 2001, the local council decided to change the name of the public square in which the monument stood from Victory Square to Peace Square, a move that was bitterly opposed by Italian right-wing groups who called for a referendum and succeeded in reversing the decision. In 2008, German speakers “staged one of the largest demonstrations against the Victory monument in years” (Steinacher 2013: p. 659). Finally, the council, spurred on by local historians, decided to promote a project of “critical preservation” of the monument. Amid local and national polemics, they secured the consent of the Italian government led by Silvio Berlusconi, so that “in January 2012 the State, the Province and the Municipality of Bolzano jointly decided on an exhibition

in the crypt of the monument, which opened two years later” (Höckerberg 2017: p. 767). As well as the new exhibition, the project involved modifying the monument itself with a critical intervention, which consisted of a three-banded LED ring around one of the columns, with the title of the exhibition in three languages, English, German and Italian.

The exhibition itself, in the space underneath the monument, starts with a vestibule where visitors can watch a short introductory film explaining the layout of the display. In the center stands the crypt, where a frieze with Latin inscriptions from classical writers celebrating glory, honor and patriotic sacrifice is illuminated at intervals with quotations from Hannah Arendt (“Nobody has the right to obey”), Bertolt Brecht (“Unhappy those peoples who need heroes”) and Thomas Paine (“The duty of a patriot is to protect his country from its government”). All around the crypt the layout of the exhibition follows three narrative strands: an inner path, which explores the history of the Monument, an outer path, which deals with the history of the city from 1918 to 1945 and beyond, and four corner rooms, which address in a critical manner the question of what a monument is, aiming at deconstructing its meaning and status.

To what extent can these interventions be defined as agonistic and dialogic? In their analysis of the changes brought to the monument, Angelucci and Kerschbamer (2017: p. 62) ask some very pertinent questions:

Is this a new, monologic, hegemonic reading, or an open and dialogic one? Is the exhibition simply substituting one fascist message with another and thus exploiting the monument for a different agenda? Or is this a more complex way to question the nature of public architecture?

They answer these questions by critiquing the nature of the interventions as representing “the propaganda of democracy” rather than “democratic practice” (p. 66). In particular, they argue that the laser texts in the crypt represent new ideological and prescriptive mottos challenging the old ones, while the historical contextualization offered by the exhibition is didactic and prescriptive. Their conclusion is clear cut: “The exhibition works as a counter-monument that questions the original but does not create a space in which a dialogic debate can take place” (p. 69). As for the LED ring on one of the monument’s columns, they claim that it sends an ambiguous message, as on the one hand it profanes and secularizes the original monument, while on the other it celebrates the triumph of a new secular power (p. 65).

There is little doubt that the 2014 interventions have a predominantly cosmopolitan character. This is for many something to be celebrated. As the architects in charge of the project, Gruppe Gut (2014: p. 4) openly stated, the superimposed quotations in the crypt were “statements for democracy and against dictatorship”, while the LED ring on one of the monument’s columns represents “an espousal with democracy”. In his analysis of the 2014 interventions, Höckerberg (2017: p. 769) explicitly refers to a “message of reconciliation”, stating that the counter-message clearly indicates a “political position, one that rejects dictatorship and advocates the ‘never again’ argument”.

We would argue, however, that the predominant cosmopolitan character of the interventions does not preclude the incorporation of agonistic elements, which Angelucci and Kerschbamer have perhaps been too hasty in dismissing. The LED ring, for instance, is removable which, as these scholars themselves acknowledge, “may signify a desire to avoid a fixed substitution of the ‘eternal values’ of fascism with others” (2017, p. 65). Indeed, this reading chimes with the interpretation put forward by one of the architects involved in the project, who stated (Schnapp, 2014) that the LED band

replaces the Roman band with a dynamic, ever changing band, whose law is not the eternal power of the state over its citizens but rather the power of the citizens over the state in shaping a public sphere defined by participation and perpetual change.

Within the exhibition, the historical display, treated largely in an objective manner, is complemented by an unsettling giant object which reproduces the basic shape of the monument (three pillars surmounted by an architrave) reproducing the capital letter M. As the Gruppe Gut (2014) remarked:

The four corner rooms are characterised by a specially designed object in the form of the letter M. While this large M confronts visitors in the first room powerfully and full-on, it is slightly turned away from visitors entering the second room. In the third room the M has lost its architrave; only the three pillars stand in the room. Finally, in the fourth room, the monumental M has fallen into ruin: just two column stumps still stand, with the rest of the object lying on the floor, turned from an information medium into a bench.

We would argue that these four rooms do provide a space for critical reflection, as they invite visitors to question and deconstruct the role of monuments in relation to power, as opposed to repositioning the existing monument in support of a political and ideological purpose antithetical to the original one. Furthermore, these rooms appear to problematize the monument (and political power) in both its totalitarian and democratic guises, by symbolizing its decay and disintegration. Even the historical display, despite its relatively didactic content, has to be appraised in the context of Italy's revisionist culture and the fact that, to date, there is no museum in Italy dedicated to the fascist period. Hence the Bolzano exhibition offers a

rare insight into “the dark aspects of a fascist dictatorship”, which is “exceptional” in the face of “much mythification in Italian historical narratives of the fascist regime” (Höckerberg 2017: p. 769).

In conclusion, the multiple and multifaceted character of the 2014 interventions on the Victory Monument, complemented by the 2017 LED projection on the Casa del fascio allows for the incorporation of agonistic elements within a dominant cosmopolitan approach. In particular, the removable nature of the LED bands, in stark opposition to the fixed character of the original monuments, indicates that these interventions can be replaced by others in the future, thereby acknowledging that contestation and debate, rather than authority and control, should be at the heart of democracy. One could envisage the LED mottos, for instance, being replaced with more open-ended and more unsettling inscriptions in the future. Furthermore, by overlapping chronological and thematic displays, the exhibition is able to problematize the largely didactic historical narrative by critically addressing public commemorative art and its relation to power.

Nevertheless, these agonistic moments, relying mainly on art installations, do not go beyond a deconstructing phase of provocation and contestation. They can unsettle visitors and disrupt dominant linear narratives, but in themselves cannot provide radical multiperspectivism. This would require artwork to be complemented by narrative-based interventions able to give voice to the “other” in its various guises, create space for subaltern stories, reveal the agency of historical actors, expose power imbalances and inequalities. Seen in this light, the museum attached to the Victory monument represents a real missed opportunity, as a strong curatorial steer managed to impose an “objective” and monologic view of history, eschewing an open-ended and dialogic encounter between alternative memories.

The Centre for Political Beauty and the Emergence of Agonistic Practice

The Berlin-based art-activist collective Centre for Political Beauty (*Zentrum für politische Schönheit*, hereafter ZPS) has become notorious for projects that express its philosophy of “aggressive humanism”: rejecting the “niceness” of established human rights organizations, the group uses artistic expression to provoke outrage and to condemn what it regards as Germany’s self-satisfied and hypocritical belief in itself as a bastion of human rights (Zentrum für politische Schönheit, 2013). For example, in one particularly provocative action from 2015, “The Dead are Coming”, the ZPS sought permission from families of refugees who had drowned in the Mediterranean to exhume their bodies and re-bury them in Berlin (Widman, 2018). This demand that the Federal Republic of Germany should take responsibility for human rights in the wider world is rooted in a sense of Germany’s unique status in the wake of the Holocaust (Zentrum für politische Schönheit, 2013). The driving impulse of the ZPS’s work can be therefore be regarded as prototypically cosmopolitan, in that it insists on the memory of Auschwitz as a source of compassion that can be “de-territorialized” (Levy and Szneider, 2006: p. 181) to motivate resistance to other abuses.

This commitment to Holocaust memory as a foundation of the moral and political order of the post-war Federal Republic is also visible in the action that will be analyzed in more detail here, namely the display of the “Holocaust Memorial Bornhagen”, which began in November 2017 and is still open to visitors at the time of writing (May 2019). The project was a response to a speech by right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) politician Björn Höcke in January of that year, in which he described Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe as a “memorial of shame” in the heart of the German capital.

Instead, Höcke insisted that Dresden would make a better capital city, given that it was a reminder of the bombing of Germany as a “war crime” against the German people. Although right-wing conservatives and right-wing extremists have certainly challenged the centrality of Holocaust memory in contemporary German memory culture before, this speech by an elected member of the regional parliament of Thuringia was widely perceived as breaking a taboo in its outright rejection of cosmopolitan memory frame that is otherwise accepted across the political mainstream in Germany. To suggest, as Höcke did, that such remembrance made German history seem “rotten and ridiculous” (Höcke, 2017) fundamentally rejected the centrality of Holocaust memory to the political culture of the Federal Republic, for which the Berlin memorial is arguably a symbol (Niven, 2002: 232).

The response of the ZPS to Höcke’s speech was to rent a property adjacent to his family home in the picturesque Thuringian village of Bornhagen and to create a small-scale version of Peter Eisenfeld’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in its garden. The 24 steles, constructed from wooden slats and papier mâché, could only be seen fully from Höcke’s house and garden (Reinsch, 2017). Despite the cosmopolitan memory frame underlying the ZPS’s intervention, it had important agonistic effects. Indeed, this is not the first time, as von Bieberstein and Evren (2016: p. 470) argue of another of the ZPS’s actions, that “these initiatives [have] disrupt[ed] the ZPS’s own discursive and ideological script.”

The agonistic dimension to the ZPS’s project emerges specifically in spatial terms. In its location at the heart of the rebuilt capital of Germany, the Holocaust Memorial signals the reunified nation’s consensual view of the German polity as founded in respect for human rights and the rejection of nationalism. This hegemonic position goes unchallenged in the Memorial’s own environs, despite the rhetorical attack launched by Höcke. However, Höcke’s own imagination of the German nation is equally exclusive of other perspectives and is also expressed in spatial terms. He has previously described Bornhagen as a refuge for him

and his family and as a “little Bullerby” (Reinsch, 2017). With this reference to the Swedish children’s television series of the 1960s, based on the Astrid Lindgren book series *The Children of Bullerby*, Höcke draws on a popular nostalgic image of an innocent rural idyll. This idyll implicitly contrasts with the urban space of the capital, condemned in Höcke’s Dresden speech, where the parties of the political mainstream have allegedly besmirched German history through the installation of the Holocaust Memorial. Bullerby therefore represents for Höcke a space in which his own ideology is no longer tainted by history and its contemporary memorialization. However, such an imagining of the nation is only possible by excluding the uncomfortable history of the Holocaust. By installing a replica of Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial in this context, the ZPS effectively converts the original memorial from an expression of the hegemonic cosmopolitan memory culture of contemporary German and places it in an agonistic confrontation with a competing view of German history that would seek to de-emphasize Holocaust memory. In doing so, the ZPS by no means abandon its own cosmopolitan vision of what German society should be, but nevertheless shows clearly what is at stake in the confrontation of these two opposing interpretations of German history.

Despite this apparently agonistic premise, however, the status of the further activities of the ZPS around its memorial appeared to be more ambivalent. Apart from opening its memorial to the public, the ZPS also claimed to be carrying out observation of Höcke’s activities, stating that the formation of a “Civil Society Office for the Protection of the Federal Constitution” had become necessary given the inaction of the official Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which is charged with observing extremist groups.

Initial reactions to the ZPS’s activities in Bornhagen from the political sphere were swift and condemnatory, with the regional chairman of the conservative Christian Democrats comparing the apparently intimidatory methods of the ZPS to those of the former German Democratic Republic’s Ministry for State Security, better known as the *Stasi* (Eggerichs,

2017). In contrast, the Minister President of Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow, who represents the socialist party Die Linke, complained that the ZPS was losing sight of the victims of the Holocaust (Anon, 2017). In the media, the ZPS was criticized across the political spectrum: left-wing daily *taz*, for example, complained that such a confrontational approach could only lead to “people talking past each other” (Eggerichs, 2017), while the conservative *Die Welt* warned of the dangers of vigilantism (Mayer, 2017). The ZPS also attracted attention from the police, after a complaint that the group were subjecting Höcke to illegal coercion by insisting that they would only end the action if he kneeled before their memorial and asked for forgiveness (Reinsch, 2017).¹

From the point of view of agonistic politics, this approach on the part of the ZPS also has certain problematic aspects. While the ZPS was not threatening Höcke with physical violence, its action could be interpreted as seeking to silence him in an antagonistic fashion as an enemy. Paradoxically, in seeking to defend a cosmopolitan memory, which is clearly the bedrock of the group’s own engagement for human rights in the present, it opened itself up to accusations of repressing the views of others, which itself had uncomfortable echoes of Germany’s past. Indeed, the ZPS seemed to embrace these parallels, stating that it was using Nazi methods against Nazis (Werneburg, 2017). On closer examination, however, this ongoing activity around the Bornhagen memorial nevertheless had important effects in terms of revealing the conditions under which radical multiperspectivism can be made possible.

The starting point for understanding the agonistic dimension of this practice is Mouffe’s assertion that engagement with right-wing populists requires of them that they must recognize that their opponents are adversaries whose voice must be heard. While the contemporary populist right has frequently sought to present itself as the victim of a denial of free speech, that is to say as censored by alleged “political correctness”, its credentials as honest participants in such an agonistic political process are flimsy. As Mudde argues, what

he calls “radical right populists” emphasize their commitment to democracy, but this commitment tends to focus on the supposedly unified political will of the people. This “monism” is in tension with the “pluralism” of liberal democracy, which assumes that different groups of individuals have different and competing interests and understandings of the world (Mudde, 2007: p. 157). Therefore, we can expect an at best ambivalent attitude on the part of such politicians towards those who express competing views.

This tension is also pertinent to the engagement of right-wing populists in the politics of memory. As Cento Bull notes (2018: pp. 217–218), the monism observed by Mudde is underpinned in populist discourse by a recourse to an idealized past, in which the national community was supposedly whole. This unity is deemed to have been destroyed by various enemies: in the case of Höcke, those who promote Holocaust memory in Germany are regarded as having weakened the nation by making Germans feel ashamed of their history. Under such circumstances, the views of political opponents on the correct interpretation of the past are more likely to be perceived as an existential threat to the nation, as opposed to their occupying a valid position in an agonistic debate. As a number of commentators have shown, the AfD has increasingly come to be dominated by individuals who would equally have been at home, and indeed have at one point been at home, in extreme right-wing groups and parties (Grimm, 2015; Decker, 2016; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). Höcke, as chair of the party in Thuringia, has been a key figure in this shift. It is in this context that some of the ZPS’s apparently more antagonistic actions against Höcke ultimately succeeded in producing some useful agonistic effects, particularly in terms of the reaction they provoked from Höcke and his supporters within the party.

Broadly, Höcke’s response to the ZPS’s action was characterized by seeking a victim role for himself and his family, from which position he sought to portray the ZPS activists as dangerous elements who themselves had no place in a democratic society. In response to the

alleged observation of his home, Höcke used a speech to a conference organized by the right-wing magazine *Compact* to stress the vulnerability of his four children and accused ZPS activists of being “terrorists” (Fiedler, 2017), a label that “immediately evokes the moral battle between good and evil that Mouffe identifies with antagonistic, rather than agonistic, politics” (Cento Bull, 2018: p. 230).

However, the ZPS soon revealed its observation of Höcke had, in fact, been a fabrication. While producing footage of ZPS members in camouflage gear and trench coats, the ZPS had collected publicly available information and images on Höcke and his property, montaging these together in their promotional films to create the impression that an observation had been underway. This does not rule out that Höcke may well still have felt threatened, of course. However, in retrospect, these rather absurd images point to the use of satire and irony to provoke Höcke into exposing his antagonistic and aggressive position, as shown by his subsequent actions.

As Ferguson (2016) has argued, the use of irony can be understood as an agonistic strategy in Mouffe’s terms, in that it trains the audience to pay critical attention to the perspectives of the actors involved in any situation. This is achieved through the creation of moments of ambivalence, which invite the audience to interrogate the motivations for actors’ attempts to impose clear meaning. Furthermore, as discussed above with reference to Bakhtin (1981), humor and parody can destabilize “authoritative discourse”. In the case of the ZPS’s supposed surveillance activities, the readiness of Höcke to interpret these actions as the work of “terrorists” revealed something important about his own politics, while the support for Höcke offered by mainstream politicians arguably exposed their political opportunism.

The opening of the Holocaust Memorial Bornhagen itself was accompanied not only by protests by supporters of Höcke, but also by intimidation against ZPS members, who were jostled as they attempted to enter the property. Subsequently, tires of vehicles belonging to

the ZPS were slashed and one of Höcke's supporters, apparently a local man, was caught on camera by Franco-German broadcaster ARTE suggesting that the activists were the sort of people "they used to string up." Edited versions of this video material and images from the confrontation subsequently became part of the on-line presence that the ZPS created for the action.

What Höcke's response and that of his supporters tended to suggest was that, although the right-wing of the AfD has sought to present itself as a normal part of the democratic spectrum by participating in parliamentary democracy, it harbors repressive and potentially violent impulses towards those with whom it disagrees: in word and thought, if not actually in deed. As if to drive this point home, the ZPS subsequently raised the stakes of the confrontation by producing fake election material in the name of Landolf Ladig, which was then displayed as posters on their Holocaust Memorial site, around the village, and on a dedicated website with merchandise (<https://www.politicalbeauty.de/landolf/>). Ladig is a nom de plume of the author of texts that appeared in magazines associated with the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Höcke has always denied authorship of these texts, despite rumors to the contrary. He has also made threats to sue anyone who claims that Ladig is his pseudonym (Leber, 2018), yet has thus far refrained from attempting to sue the ZPS for making this association.

These supplementary actions, building on the initial creation of the temporary memorial in Bornhagen, have clearly had the effect of revealing important aspects of the politics of Höcke and his supporters, revealing their desire to silence political opponents, dismissing them as "terrorist" enemies or seeking to use physical intimidation of the kind demonstrated by Höcke's local supporters. Although the self-confessed "Nazi methods" of the ZPS may be distasteful to some, and contain their own antagonistic dangers, in this case they appear to have provoked Höcke and his supporters to behave in such a way that their

claim to a place in the spectrum of democratic parties is attenuated. Furthermore, they reveal the inability of other democratic politicians to reflect on the exposed nature of Höcke's monist position. For example, on the ZPS's web pages dedicated to Bornhagen, comments by AfD politicians and supporters decrying the ZPS as terrorists are shown alongside criticism from the Christian Democrats, all under the banner "The AfD's praise for our action." The force of this critique was compounded by the revelation that the allegedly repressive measures carried out against Höcke were (in retrospect) patently laughable fabrications.

It remains to be seen if further elements will be added to the project, which currently remains open-ended, in order to provoke further reactions from Höcke and the right-wing of the AfD. Although the ZPS has come at times dangerously close to an antagonistic position in its desire to defend the cosmopolitan memory consensus of contemporary Germany, its utilization of the form of the memorial and the counter-memorial practices it has developed around it, together with grotesque and satirical interventions, have produced important agonistic effects, which can be characterized in terms of three related moves.

Firstly, by re-situating the Holocaust Memorial in Bornhagen, the ZPS has allowed the view of Germany's past and future embodied by that memorial to enter into confrontation with the opposed worldview of the AfD. This radically multiperspectival maneuver does not lessen the commitment of the ZPS to its own understanding of that past and future, but does demonstrate starkly the stakes of such a debate. In their second move, through a series of provocative and ultimately humorous actions around the memorial, they have demonstrated that, even where the AfD is (as it were) invited to enter into the kind of dialogue that would result in the "conflictual consensus" (Mouffe, 2000: p. 103) necessary for democracy, its representatives and supporters quickly fall into the attitude of treating as enemies those who espouse a different vision of German society and its relationship to the past. Finally, by recourse to the grotesque and the satirical, the ZPS has exposed not only the inability of the

AfD to reflect upon their own monist vision of society but also the difficulty experienced by the hegemonic cosmopolitan mode in engaging with cultural interventions which potentially subvert the status quo.

Conclusion

While this article began by raising the question of whether agonistic interventions around public commemorative art could provide an alternative model to the predominantly cosmopolitan approach to counter-memorial practice in contemporary Europe, the case studies set out above demonstrate that we are by no means at a point when the cosmopolitan framing of such practice could be said to have been superseded. Clearly, cosmopolitan, agonistic and even antagonistic practice continue to co-exist in the historically, culturally and politically specific contexts examined above. Nevertheless, what we have shown in both cases is that cosmopolitan counter-memorial practices reach their limit where they seek to impose a memory consensus, which in itself can provide a foil that populist forces can react against and instrumentalize in pursuit of their own agendas. Where this limit is reached, we would argue, we can see the emergence of more agonistic interventions that address two important weaknesses of cosmopolitan memory.

Firstly, as the example of Bolzano-Bozen shows, the attempt to re-contextualize fascist-era monuments, while potentially valuable in terms of challenging unacknowledged ideological legacies, can easily close down debate about the meaning of such sites, in a fashion that is incompatible with a more radical understanding of democracy, and which also provides a platform for populists to claim that such re-interpretations are imposed by an elite that fails to listen to the voice of the people. As we have shown, the agonistic elements in the re-presentation of the Victory Monument and the Casa del fascio demonstrate that it would

have been possible to more systemically open up a space in which the relationship between the various political positions involved could have been articulated and scrutinized, both denying the populist right the grievance of apparent exclusion and subjecting their stance to critical reflection. Secondly, as the example of the Holocaust Memorial Bornhagen demonstrates, while the cosmopolitan consensus provides political opportunities for the populist right to gain a foothold as champions of “anti-establishment” views, such parties also provide a haven for those of the radical right who seek to present themselves as occupying one position on the political spectrum that lies within the bounds of agonistic contestation. Agonistic practice can, in this instance, be seen in terms of holding others to a test of agonistic engagement, seeking to develop strategies that reveal whether such actors are truly committed to agonistic contestation.

What also becomes clear, however, is the extent to which the fact of installation of a static counter-memorial artistic intervention is not in itself enough to promote the radical multiperspectivism that truly agonistic practice would demand. As we see with conventionally cosmopolitan counter-memorial practice, there is always a danger that mostly abstract and ambiguous counter-memorials can become settled elements of a hegemonic consensus, or that they fail to truly reveal enough about the interests and identities associated with the historical context. While the concept of agonism remains important in this context, we are therefore led to challenge Mouffe’s apparent faith in art to achieve radical multiperspectivism.

One of the strengths of the ZPS’s project in Bornhagen has been that it has continued to find new ways of framing the memorial it has created and the discourse around it, so that the meaning of the artistic intervention and the actions of its opponents have had to be constantly re-interpreted: each new element of the project has revealed more about the motivations and interests of those involved, particularly in the case of its right-wing populist

opponents, who have been drawn out into the open in ways that have undermined their claims to democratic commitment. Finally, the ability of the hegemonic cosmopolitan mode to reflect on its own constructed identity and open up to contestation and debate has been put into question. Despite these agonistic traits, however, the ZPS's project has not been able to put forward alternative democratic imaginings and perspectives.

In conclusion, single agonistic interventions around monuments can challenge and partially deconstruct the hegemonic memory regime, but cannot promote radical multiperspectivism or in-depth reflection upon the constructed nature of established identities. What is required is complex, multi-layered and sustained socio-cultural practices. The challenge for both scholars and artistic practitioners will be to imagine how such evolving agonistic practices can be sustained in the longer term.

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¹ In April of 2019, it emerged that the police in Thuringia had in fact opened, then later closed, an investigation of the ZPS on the suspicion of ‘forming a criminal organization’ (Zeit Online 2019).