

A reply to Nathan Sznajder

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We wish first of all to thank Nathan Sznajder for taking the time to engage in a (robust) conversation with Hans and myself, as the main proponents of the “agonistic memory” mode that has underpinned the Horizon 2020 project known as UNREST. When we wrote our original joint article (entitled “On Agonistic memory” and published online in 2015 by *Memory Studies*), we hoped to start a fruitful debate with the proponents of the cosmopolitan mode, a debate that, while in no way shunning controversy, would yet be able to further our understanding of the main traits, strengths and weaknesses of the different memory modes we had identified. From this perspective, we warmly welcome Nathan’s intervention.

It seems to us that Nathan has put forward a strong defence of the cosmopolitan memory mode, which relies on two types of argument. First, the argument that cosmopolitanism has been wilfully misunderstood and misrepresented and that therefore what Hans and I have critiqued is but a travesty of the cosmopolitan approach developed by himself in collaboration with Daniel Levy and Alejandro Baer. Therefore, he sets out to dispel what he sees as the most serious misunderstandings and to clarify what cosmopolitanism actually stands for. Second, he advances some strong criticisms of the agonistic memory theory developed by Hans and myself, which he defines as “bad agonality” not least since, as he states, it “was developed by thinkers like Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe who I take as examples of two thinkers rejecting liberal and pluralist thinking from the Right as well as from the Left”. Furthermore, he claims that while cosmopolitanism is utopian and offers “a promise of a better world”, this is “exactly why thinkers coming from the Right or the Left like Schmitt and Mouffe cannot stand it, thinkers who do not ask to be utopian anymore but have the desire to connect to people and their realities”. It seems to us that in putting forward these criticisms Nathan is himself trading in misunderstandings. Let us first dispel these, before we return to what we perceive as the shortcomings of cosmopolitanism.

To begin with, we want to express our disappointment with Nathan’s rhetorical strategy that takes its point of departure in the initial part of his intervention and develops all through the text. To argue that, because all sorts of representatives of authoritarian parties and regimes from Stalin to Trump over time have opposed and attacked cosmopolitan outlooks, any criticism of cosmopolitanism seems to be tainted with authoritarian stains, whether it comes from the right (Schmidt) or from the left (Mouffe), appears remarkably close to a pre-emptive move. This is, in our

view, a way of arguing that is not conducive to a free exchange of ideas and points of view on the merits and demerits of our respective approaches. Leaving aside the rhetoric, let us turn to the substance of Nathan's argument. By bracketing Schmitt and Mouffe together, Nathan labels both thinkers as anti-liberal and anti-pluralist. Yet Mouffe makes it very clear that she fully departs from Schmitt's illiberalism in endorsing liberal democracy. Incidentally, this stance is also one of the reasons why she has been attacked by orthodox Marxists. Nevertheless, Mouffe acknowledges the tension that characterises the relationship between liberalism, that promotes the ideas of individual liberty and rights, and democracy, that promotes collective sovereignty and equality, but she sees this conflict as productive, provided that it does not lead to the destruction of either liberalism or democracy. To prevent this outcome, she advocates agonism, whereby the conflicting visions and ideas that of necessity characterise political struggles do not engender antagonistic relations between enemies to be destroyed but are played out between "adversaries", who are able to recognise each other's right to express and defend their ideas. In short, Mouffe offers us a way to salvage liberal democracy from those bent on attacking and destroying it (which in the current climate is certainly a timely undertaking), but she is able to do so while fully acknowledging the need to address the conflicts raging within our societies, as opposed to ignoring them. If anything, it is the latter position that is more inimical to liberal democracy and could even be defined as complacent.

What constitutes "good" or "bad agonality"? Nathan writes that Hannah Arendt's concept of agonism is good agonism because it tries to synthesize the opposing structures, to reach agreement and consensus, and because it is therefore compatible with cosmopolitanism. But that is exactly Mouffe's criticism of Arendt and cosmopolitanism: neither of them acknowledges the existence of asymmetrical power relations or hegemonic ideologies, nor do they recognize the ontological condition of antagonistic relations (*Agonistics*, chapter 1). It is this difference between the two versions of agonism which lies behind our claim that agonism (in Arendt's version) and cosmopolitanism do not recognize conflict as a fundamental condition. Nathan believes this claim to be untrue, but what part of it is false? So, we ask again: what is good or bad agonality? Is promising a better world without taking into account "people and their realities", including the social inequalities and the real dangers these asymmetrical relations may pose to our cherished liberal democracies "good agonality"? And does promising a better world while addressing the risks we are facing constitute "bad" agonality? The answer to both questions seems obvious to us.

Let us return to the issue of the shortcomings of cosmopolitanism. To his credit, Nathan takes the risks of antagonism very seriously and his proposed solution, following Coser, is to argue that we

need to strive to replace polarised societies, in which a few divisions cut deep, with more fragmented societies, characterised by overlapping identities and loyalties. In the latter, “such individuation fosters personal ties that reach across and further knit together social divisions. This is how memory in modern societies works”. In our view, memory in modern societies sometimes works in this way but in the political sphere, it more often works to construct strong collective identities pitting US against THEM and fuelling social and political grievances. Society is imbued with asymmetrical power relations, and politics and identities are by force divided between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions engaged in conflict and competition. Therefore, the US/THEM relations tend to prevail, and it is indeed this second type of memory work that has become ever more apparent in our societies, helping to recreate strongly polarised societies. Hence cosmopolitanism’s proposed solution has demonstrably failed to prevent the return of clear-cut political divisions, which validates agonism’s argument that to defuse antagonism we need to turn enemies into adversaries rather than hoping that fragmented identities will be able to trump political polarisation. As Nathan states, “Cosmopolitanism is about a plurality of antagonisms and differences” and as such it is not equipped to understand and explain head-on political confrontations, even less to offer the tools for defusing their destructive potential. Linked to this is the issue of conflict vs. norms. As Nathan states, “Cosmopolitans recognize, of course, that the key to squaring the circle is to realize that the soul of politics is conflict, but that at the same time the soul of social life is the production of common norms”. We fully concur with this, but to think that common norms can tame conflict is illusory. Since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, we have seen with what ease internationally agreed norms can come under attack or even be rescinded at the initiative of those same actors who promoted them in the first place.

This brings us to Nathan’s argument that cosmopolitan memory is indeed about passions and sentiments. We fully accept this point, but we would still contend that cosmopolitan memory has problems acknowledging the role played by strong collective socio-political passions, especially “less desirable” ones like hatred, shame, humiliation and resentment. These are precisely the passions we associate with political polarisation but since the stated preoccupation of cosmopolitan memory is with fostering individualisation and fragmented groups, it has difficulty understanding the passions that pit large groups against each other. This difficulty has consequences in terms of transitional justice. Nathan talks about the Hobbesian situation found in many post-conflict societies when trying to reconcile peace with morality. It is telling that he focuses on morality rather than politics and on the concerns involved in “weighing the benefits of remembering and acting upon past human rights abuses against the costs that such memories could incur for human rights violations in the future”.

There is no mention of socio-political divisions and polarisation leading to violent confrontation and civil war or of the need to understand the historical context and political struggles, in which it became possible to carry out human rights abuses. This is precisely what we mean when we argue that cosmopolitan memory depoliticises the past. To focus on human rights abuses devoid of historical and political context prevents us from understanding why and how they became possible and what led ordinary people to turn into mass perpetrators ready to violate such rights.

Nathan's denial of cosmopolitanism's depoliticizing effects is surprising, also given the fact that he himself in an article published together with Alejandro Baer in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (2015) in our view corroborates this view. They write: "Trauma ignores the circumstantial by stressing the universality of its theoretical notions, and so does the concept of human rights. They are universalist concepts that exclude or subordinate community, culture, and context" (p. 188). In another article, "Ghosts of the Holocaust in Franco's Mass Graves", also written together with Baer and published in *Memory Studies* in 2015, the two authors state that "with the adoption of a language linked with the Holocaust, the political history of the conflict recedes or is forgotten" (p. 7). This is the kind of decontextualization we believe is inherent in the cosmopolitan memory discourse and lies at the heart of its depoliticizing effect. We could not express it more precisely – this is exactly the agonistic critique of cosmopolitanism's depoliticizing effect.

Nathan also addresses the important issue of cosmopolitanism's relationship with the nation-states and national cultures, not least in view of the growing rise of nationalist movements. As he states, "(t)he point of cosmopolitanism is to see that the universal and particular exist in a dialectical relation. They do not oppose each other; they define and influence each other". Once again, it seems to us that the emphasis here is on a harmonic relationship between the two, which can certainly be the case, for instance as far as the relationship between the EU and member states has played out until recently. Nevertheless, this same example also warns us that at other times the relationship can be conflictual and confrontational, and the outcome can be total rupture. This was the case of Brexit, where the memory of the Second World war and negative stereotyping of national cultures were deliberately and successfully re-activated in order to promote exclusionary US/THEM relations, as opposed to overlapping identities. Furthermore, Brexit indicates that at times of great structural inequalities those who feel marginalised rally around a national culture and identity pitted against a global culture perceived as sustained and promoted by privileged elites for their own interests. As Mouffe would say, this indicates a predictable "return of the political", albeit in ways which must have taken cosmopolitans by surprise. In short, if a theory appears persistently

to ignore conflict and confrontation by prioritising cross-cutting solidarity and the “growth of common values” across the globe even in the face of contrasting evidence, that theory is deficient and needs revisiting. For cosmopolitanism and agonism to speak to each other, the latter may have to reconsider the role played by consensus and agreement in the struggle for hegemony, but the former would have to incorporate socio-political conflict and issues of uneven power into its understanding of a better world.

We fully admit that the concept of cosmopolitanism was used in a reductive and rather simplistic way in our original article in *Memory Studies*. We based our critique of cosmopolitanism exclusively on what the decolonial, literary scholar and philosopher Walter Mignolo calls “universal cosmopolitanism” (“Border Thinking, Decolonial Cosmopolitanism and Dialogues among Civilizations”, *Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, 2011), i.e. the different versions of cosmopolitanism which are based on the Kantian notion of universal ideas. We believe that such versions, despite their mutual differences, could be found in David Held, Jeffrey Alexander or Ulrich Beck, just to mention a few. However, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been claimed and appropriated by many different strands of philosophical and sociological thinking throughout the last decades (Brett Neilson “On the New Cosmopolitanism” *Journal of Transnational and Cross-Cultural Studies* 7:1 1999), some of which do take power inequalities and hegemonic structures into consideration. Among the more recent contributions which could be productive for the further development of the notion of agonistic memory could be mentioned Nikos Papastergiadis’ and Daniella Trimboli’s concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism (“Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism: The Force of the Fold in diasporic intimacy,”), Miyase Christensen’s postnormative cosmopolitanism (“Postnormative cosmopolitanism: Voice, space and politics”, both in *The International Communication Gazette* 79:6-7, 2017), and Mignolo’s notion of decolonial cosmopolitanism (see above).

In recent years initiatives have also even been taken to merge or dialogize Mouffe’s sense of agonism with different notions of cosmopolitanism. In the article “Towards an Agonistic Cosmopolitanism: Exploring the Cosmopolitan Potential of Chantal Mouffe’s Agonism” (*Critical Horizons* 17:1, 2016) Tamara Caraus criticizes the philosophical foundations of Mouffe’s vision of a global alternative to the cosmopolitan vision of a global society. Mouffe’s vision of a multipolar world order lacks, according to Caraus, a genuine alternative to the universal values such as human rights and re-introduces in the form of the criteria “good regimes” and “human dignity” the moral standards she herself criticizes so hard. On the other hand, Mouffe’s insistence on the existence of

multiple secularizations, enlightenments and modernities is, according to Caraus, productive and she engages in a discussion of how some of Mouffe's basic assumptions such as the pluralization of hegemonies at a global level, the conversion from enemy to adversary, the conflictual consensus and the practice of contestation could be reformulated and integrated into a new idea of an agonistic cosmopolitanism. We also find Nikos Papastergiadis' article "Does philosophy contribute to an invasion complex? Sloterdijk the antagonist and the agonism of Mouffe" (*Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 9:2, 2017) inspiring, as he proposes to submit what he calls an "expanded conception" of Mouffe's concept of agonism into dialogue with the concept of cosmopolitanism. Such an expanded version of agonism should, according to Paperstergiadis, consider culture as "a relatively open process of sense-making through the incorporation of difference" (p. 21). These contributions do not specifically address the topic of cultural memory, but they do provide inspiration for the development of agonistic thinking within our field. Mignolo's critique of the racialized and decolonial power relations in the contemporary society and Mouffe's vision of a multipolar world order could provide an interesting background for the discussion of established concepts like travelling memory (Erll) and multidirectional memory (Rothberg), while Caraus' initiative and Paperstergiadis' expanded conception of agonism might prove productive in a reflection upon how cultural memory processes emerge in the tension between Nathan's image of a society "cut by thousands of little divisions" and Mouffe's image of a society structured upon social inequality, hegemonic power relations and antagonistic identity relations. We find such appropriations of cosmopolitan thinking interesting and stimulating and we are more than open to enter into a dialogue on how such notions could contribute to the further development of memory studies and the notion of agonistic memory.