

Response to “Understanding Agonistic Memory”

UNREST Conference

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Rome, February 2019

When you are attacked as a cosmopolitan, you have to defend yourself as a cosmopolitan. This is what I will try to do here. Let me say at the outset that I have nothing against the concept of agonism, but I have read with quite some agony even antagonism the misunderstandings regarding cosmopolitanism. I do not think that these misunderstandings are arbitrary. They do have a genealogy. My remarks will be rather agonistic in the classic sense of the term, a contest of ideas.

In the summer of 2017, then Donald Trump’s advisor Stephen Miller, accused the CNN correspondent Jim Acosta, who is of Cuban background, to harbor a cosmopolitan bias. No, Miller did not refer to the famous cocktail we often see on American TV shows. Now, when the Trump people use that concept, they mean, of course, an elitist but with a sinister purpose.

We could remind us of a quote of Thomas Paine:

*“The world is my country; all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.”* (From mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, an Enlightenment classic by now, from 1792 the Rights of Men)

In this context, cosmopolitans are “do gooding” bad people, who do not see that their country as their country and do not want to look at their fellow citizens as their brethren. In addition, I remember, of course, the

raging of Le Pen against a "corrupt cosmopolitan oligarchy". It is about the boundaries of our commitment to others.

But we are not only talking about Trumpists and other right wing populists here, the word "cosmopolitan" has been used by Stalin as a fighting term since the end of World War II.

Therefore, to quote Josef Stalin from a speech he gave on Soviet art and culture in 1946:

*Recently, a dangerous tendency seems to be seen in some of the literary works emanating under the pernicious influence of the West and brought about by the subversive activities of the foreign intelligence. Frequently in the pages of Soviet literary journals works are found where Soviet people, builders of communism are shown in pathetic and ludicrous forms. The positive Soviet hero is derided and inferior before all things foreign and **cosmopolitanism** that we all fought against from the time of Lenin, characteristic of the political leftovers, is many times applauded. In the theater it seems that Soviet plays are pushed aside by plays from foreign bourgeois authors. The same thing is starting to happen in Soviet films.*

The speech providing the starting shot of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign at the Soviet bloc directed towards Jews and other ethnic minorities.

Thus, you can see the critics of cosmopolitanism come from both the Left and the Right. Therefore, we see similar tendencies in anti-cosmopolitan campaigns in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Israel you name it. Not only there, just think of the Brexit vote a while ago. Now, put the adjective "rootless" in front of cosmopolitanism, you start playing a game played by Bolsheviks and Fascists with quite some skill. Stalin has inherited his disdain for cosmopolitanism from Tsarist times where it was a code name

for Jews. Moreover, Putin continues this tendency in his rhetoric against the West until today. Furthermore, these anti-liberal rhetoric coming from the Left as well as from the Right do identify cosmopolitanism with market capitalism and bourgeois class interest, something good populists are, of course, against.

Now, we are academics and are not occupied with such political name-dropping, so I am not saying that this is what is going on here, but I could not help the associations while reading the paper on agonism here.

Next point, which comes to my mind reading through the paper on agonal memory, is the following; I have always been interested in *agonality* since I have done a bit of work on Hannah Arendt and her political theory. It never occurred to me that agonism and cosmopolitanism are on some kind antagonistic collision course. Actually, in my opinion, quite the opposite is the case. I do come from sociology and especially the sociology of knowledge and I use frameworks of the sociology of knowledge for the analysis of transitional justice and memory processes. My conclusion that I have reached with my co-authors Daniel Levy in the past, Alejandro Baer rather recently in our work on Argentina, Spain, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, the USA and Israel is that agonality and synthesis are actually completing and defining each other. In our sociological studies on memory politics and memory activism, it became always clear to us that the existential connectedness of thinking has to lead to ideological contestation. Especially when you talk about memory, you talk about the contest (meaning the agonality) of word views and how people think and interpret the past. Clearly, there is no unitary or uniform worldview, but only various descriptions of reality. Thus, I will talk a bit about the sociology of knowledge and its relationship to

agonistic political processes and then see its connection to transitional justice.

The sociology of knowledge is an attempt to find new foundations for knowledge when the shifting of foundations had made everything seems relative. It started with a simple but central proposition: the ultimate foundations of knowledge are sociological. Therefore, talking about memory, you talk about a plurality of knowledge. However, as intellectuals and scholars, we are somehow obligated to work towards a synthesis, otherwise we will just be caught up in the same dichotomies we analyze and criticize. This is exactly what cosmopolitan thinking means. It tries to synthesize various structures of thought. In my opinion, this is what agonality actually means, coming from the ancient Greek concept of *contest*. Through contest, you constantly reach a new synthesis. This is what good agonality is all about. It is cosmopolitan and it is different from bad agonality, which 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.

Cosmopolitanism means to be open to experimental life (at least for me this is what it means). It is a shining word, a promise of a better world, a dream not yet come through. It is utopian like a dream. It has the sound of ancient Greeks celebrating the collapse of the old polis and the opening of new political spaces. It has the sound of the "Age of Empire" where citizenship is not be bound to small entities anymore. Clearly, it is an utopia, with the sound of disengagement, the sound of a radical individualism not bound to group and other territory, a fellowship of likeminded women and men pursuing their happiness beyond any kind of

belonging. "To be at home in the world", this is what it means to be an intellectual despairing at the narrowness of his or her surroundings. I am sure there are many reasons to be against it, because Cosmopolitanism also sounds like the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion of markets and moral sentiments, expansion of reason and moral will. In short, cosmopolitanism is the victory of mind over matter, the imagining of a better world, where people crisscross without border posts, without passports where everybody acts interdependently in a peaceful world. A world of yesterday turned into a utopian future and reclaimed by social thinkers elevating "homelessness", "fluidity", "liquidity", "fixity" to new heights. Cosmopolitanism has the sound of nobility in a plebeian age, the nobleness of Kant in a postmodern age. That 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. Fair enough.

Now, when it comes to memory, I think we need a concept of the public where divisions can unite, and where indifference and social distance can contribute to society's integration. Again, this jives with good agonism as well. 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. Thus, what we need is an explanation of how public conflict can be the key to integration—how the clash of conflicting norms can deepen our common norms and makes them stronger. This brings us back to old classics of sociology, which understood this quite early, thinkers like Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim or Lewis Coser.

Let us take *Conflict Functionalism* by Lewis Coser from 1954 as a good example. He argues that when there are only one, two, or three divisions in society, they cut deep; loyalties are strong, and therefore antagonisms are just as strong. However, when there are numerous divisions, each of them commands a smaller, more fragmented group loyalty and is opposed by a disorganized and therefore milder opposition. Societies cohere because the overall tension has been lessened. This is one reason why a free press, and a freely elected parliament in which all parties participate, is less likely to lead to revolution than the oppression of all dissent. From the individual perspective, not only do people in such a society find they have several overlapping identities, but it is easier for them to choose new groups to belong to. In a polarized society, one takes up a taste associated with the class or religious or generational enemy at the risk of being ostracized by one's friends. In such a world, many identities the individual might find satisfying are ringed with taboo. In a society cut by thousands of little divisions, the force of taboo is much lessened. It is easy to mix and match, to discover personal tastes never would have discovered without experiment, and never would have experimented with if it counted as a costly transgression. Consequently, such a society fosters individuation. Moreover, such individuation fosters personal ties that reach across and further knit together social divisions. This is how memory in modern societies works. Thus, the whole debate between agonistic, antagonistic or cosmopolitan memory makes only sense in the framework of a social analysis where you actually look at people and ask how they feel about the past.

I am not sure I understand the claim of those who argue that cosmopolitanism does not take into account passions and sentiments; that

is simply not true. Cosmopolitan memory is about passions, sentiments, and the way people's thinking and feeling about the past affects the way they wish to shape the future. This is, of course, an act of translation. An old point made by Walter Benjamin that translation is to grasp the plurality of languages and they live in a constant state of flux, therefore translation is also the task of the language of cosmopolitanism.

I think this is a rather important point and we always pointed out that in our work when we talked about cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan memory: there is NOT one language of cosmopolitanism, but many languages, tongues, grammars. Cosmopolitanism is about a plurality of antagonisms and differences.

A while ago, Daniel Levy and I introduced the concept of "cosmopolitan memory" into the debate on memory and transnationalism. Now, when we started out we were not exactly sure what we meant by it. It was more of a hunch that something changed with memory in modern times. It was more a mode of thought and even action embodied in the memory of the future. It was a kind Prolepsis, something, which we translated into sociology, namely that cosmopolitanism memory means actually the memory of the future. Prolepsis is the anticipation of the future as already existing in the present – cosmopolitan memory is an anxious ethics of anticipation. Specific iconicity of a specific historic event develops an allegorical aura that displaces its powers of signification and symbolization from one historical event to another, from one singularity of suffering to another, from one historical context to another. Now, this is not the end of politics as claimed by some, but a new kind of politics. We also problematized reconciliation, showed how previous suffering does not make one more sensitive to suffering of others. Cosmopolitan memory can move from reconciliation to revenge and constantly translate

anxiety. Cosmopolitan memory is, of course, not only based on dignity (like in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) – we never claimed that, but also on our alienation, moral ambivalences and personal *agonisms*. That is what cosmopolitan memory is all about: A past that refuses to die, confronted by a future that will not wait to be born.

Transitional justice troubles us because we know that transitional justice is not just, the most it is necessary. There are other theoretical formations working in similar paths. Besides being cosmopolitan memory scholars have pointed out that memory is travelling (the work of Astrid Erll), or multi-directional in the words of Michael Rothberg. All speak of a territorialized memory that is increasingly shared by individuals otherwise dispersed by culture, ethnic origin, religion, or class.

Nevertheless, as important as well, this does not conflict with the fact that remembrance is always embedded in particular temporalities and spatial contexts. While it is remembered across borders, the story and the messages it entails can vary as much, or even more, as when it was confined to survivor communities in the postwar years. Thus, we, of course, welcome the concept of “agonistic memory” to these theoretical frameworks. There is no contradiction involved here.

We cosmopolitans know that after every war in history follows eventually peace. Does that mean that achieving democracy is dependent on mass amnesia? Maybe it is too much to ask. People do remember. Memory gets into the way of transitional justice. Bodies rise from the earth. The dead and the near-dead witnesses are talking, and although everyone wants the prosperity that comes from "moving forward," this is never the only agenda. One could see this clearly in Spain and Paco Ferrandiz has done all the work to explain how and why this happened. Sometimes, we have a quintessential Hobbesian situation, where civil peace is often more



important than morality and where it is often the only precondition that can make real morality possible. There are times when this is fundamentally the opposite of a memory perspective, which assumes that civil peace can never be endangered by its activities and that no amount of mobilization, polarization, and anathematization can ever bring about a complete breakdown of the state but always only purify it. The ultimate reality of the situation is the needs of peace, which means the realities of power. There are times when an argument has to be made in favor of flexible principles, whose essence is to find the best solution given the constraints of the situation and the likelihood at any point of making things worse or less durable. These principles are designed to lead to the best compromise. They are the right principles to guide choices even when trying to reach the humanitarian goal of creating a society in which people live better, safer, freer, less fearful lives. These concerns involve 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. Moreover, there are times when this is just not enough anymore. Again, this is what cosmopolitan sociology is all about. At times, agonistic, at times antagonistic and at times searching for a synthesis.

The idea of Cosmopolitanism tries to preserve both the universal cosmos and the particular polis. It is about the interaction between global constellations and local circumstance. It is based amongst others on revulsions against the Holocaust and World War II, Stalinism, Colonialism and other forms of repression. The trap that we may find ourselves is, of course, the need to understand that Nationalists create absolutes out of relatives while Cosmopolitans seek to relativize all absolutes. Moreover, it seems at times that these tendencies are

conflicting with each other. However, the 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. This is a crucial point in the cosmopolitan enterprise. In methodological cosmopolitanism, the universal means what it does because the particulars are its background, and where the particulars mean what they do because the universal is their background. As a result when one changes, the other changes -- but importantly neither disappears. Universalism and particularism need to be thought out together. This means that the strength of global culture does not entail the weakness of national culture. On the contrary, the strength of national culture is what produces cosmopolitan culture. The mutual influence of nations through the institutions of globalization produces both sides of cosmopolitanization: the central but growing core of common values; and the globalized variations of local meaning.

We seek to give space to people's understandings of the past, as contradictory as they may be. Global constellations provide global patterns of how to structure the past in local settings. It would be a commonplace simplification to argue that people are prisoners of the past. I actually think that people everywhere engage creatively with the past: they develop a sense of self and their immediate group create institutions and develop actions informed by their views of the past. They relate to their own, their group's, or their nation's past in different ways. I give you an example from our work how this can be understood in terms of cosmopolitan memory: Holocaust memory was created out of national memories in the same way that the EU was created out of nation states. In a similar manner, it has become independent of those national memories without shedding them completely, and it has begun to exert a shaping

force upon them. It has the same relation to the EU as national collective memories have to nation states: it may provide a collective identity, a we/they relation in which all members of the polity can participate to become part of the We. Thus, it could be the almost natural accompaniment of the constitution of a new collectivity. This was not originally so. It took decades for this phenomenon to develop into its present form. The Holocaust began to be publicly remembered, even in countries as removed from the crime scene as Argentina and Spain, decades after the reality itself had passed. It did not in any way spring naturally from those events. It originally emerged in many Western countries for very different reasons, in very different national contexts, and had very different meanings.

In short, to argue that cosmopolitan memory de-politicizes is in my humble opinion not accurate. The argument that the cosmopolitan mode of remembering builds on an understanding of the world as one big and potentially harmonious entity is an untrue rumor about cosmopolitanism.