Time to use military history to diminish the power of the new nationalists

A rising tide of nationalists recount ‘them’ and ‘us’ tales of past glory to conjure up a bright future for their cause. EU project UNREST explored the narratives on offer at war museums to suggest an alternative approach for societies to preserve a democratic EU.

Nationalists are again winning support by telling a ‘them’ and ‘us’ narrative about past wars to serve their political ends today. EU project UNREST (Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe) examined war museums and excavations of the bodies of the victims of wars to explore historical methods that can contrast nationalist narratives.

“It should be possible to encourage museum makers to adopt forms of historical dialogue that are more capable of engaging vernacular nationalisms in contemporary
Europe,” writes Stefan Berger, UNREST project coordinator in ‘Is the Memory of War in Contemporary Europe Enhancing Historical Dialogue?’ The paper, one of about a dozen written on the project, is due to be published by Routledge in its series ‘Studies in Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity’.

The war museums studied on the project mainly adopt an over-simplistic ‘good’ and ‘evil’ approach, found researchers. The worst treat the host nation as a superior ‘historical master’ who defeated enemies in the past – an ‘antagonistic’ approach – echoed by nationalists. But most adopt a ‘cosmopolitan’ trend, which though better, does society few favours. “Instead of understanding past violence and promoting self-reflection about the underlying reasons for it, cosmopolitanism condemns past violence with reference to abstract universal values,” writes Berger.

Its understandable focus on war’s victims often leaves out the perpetrator’s perspective, the vast amount of hard-to-classify bystanders and the fact that victims can become perpetrators and vice versa.

A path to Brexit

The Imperial War Museum in London takes an ‘antagonistic’ approach, find the researchers, with exhibits of heroic British soldiers in the First World War contrasted with exhibits of mainly statistics representing soldiers from the other nations involved. “We can see strong antagonistic memory being promoted by the Brexit camp, differentiating between a morally ‘bad’ German-run them, in the form of the EU,” said Berger.

They find the quintessential ‘cosmopolitanism’ museum is the House of European History, opened in Brussels in 2017, which simplifies to offer a sanitised vision of the past. “The museum encourages a dialogue with the past that posits a violent history of war and genocide against the promise of European peace, stability and modernity,” writes Berger. “It shies away from directly representing conflicts between different European nation states that are still informing conflicts in Europe today.”

The researchers developed the concept of a better third way – the ‘agonistic’ approach, building on work by philosopher Chantal Mouffe.

They find examples in museums and they also organised an exhibition with the provocative title ‘War Makes Sense’ in Essen, Germany, and a play, ‘Donde el Bosque se Espesa’ which premiered in Spain, to test agonistic history with audiences.

They also see it in the exhumation of victims of the dictatorship of Francisco Franco’s forces in the Spanish Civil War. “The exhumations challenge the hegemonic memory narrative established during the Spanish transition to democracy which underlines the existence of perpetrators and victims on ‘both sides’ of the conflict and maintains a discursive silence on the left-wing victims, still buried in unmarked graves,” Berger explains.

Keywords

UNREST, nationalists, antagonistic, cosmopolitan, agonistic, Imperial War Museum, Brexit, Spanish Civil War, House of European History
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