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| An introduction to Agonistic Memory | **C:\Users\Nitin Parmar\Desktop\uob-logo-black-transparent.tif** |

**In their theory of agonistic memory, Professor Anna Bull and Professor Hans Lauge Hansen build on an existing criticism of cosmopolitanism which argues that this memory mode has not been able to prevent the rise of antagonistic memories which are constructed by populist, neo-nationalist movements.**

The 2014 European elections marked the high point of this type of antagonistic politics.

‘Agonistic memory’ was introduced as a way to overcome the lack of interaction between the cosmopolitan mode and this antagonistic way of remembering. A [full discussion of agonistic memory](https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/files/116012882/On_Agonistic_memory_final_version_for_Open_Access.pdf) can be found in Anna and Hans’ article.

Unlike antagonistic memory, agonistic memory **avoids pitting ‘good’ against ‘evil’** and instead **acknowledges the human capacity for evil in specific circumstances and in certain social and political contexts**. Anna and Hans argue that focusing on ‘us’ and ‘them’ constructs history as something done to people, negating individual agency. Both antagonistic and cosmopolitan modes of memory tend to simplify past historical events, either to misrepresent the past to further certain political agendas (antagonism), or de-contextualise the past to promote a new kind of universalism (cosmopolitanism). Agonistic memory focuses instead on **reconstructing the historical context**, specific **socio-political struggles**, and the **individual and group stories** which led to violence and war.

Hearing the **testimonies of both victims AND perpetrators** is crucial in agonistic memory, as well as witnesses, bystanders, spies, and traitors. The testimonies of perpetrators can help us to understand when, how, and why people turn into perpetrators. Instead we need to learn from these different perspectives.

**Emotions and passions** are important in agonistic memory, they do not undermine democracy or preclude understanding. You will recall that in antagonism, passions and emotions cement a sense of belonging to a certain community or national group, and in cosmopolitanism, the focus is on empathizing with the suffering of the victims. Agonism argues that **passion is an important force** to reinvigorate politics and can be used to create a sense of solidarity without demonising the ‘evil other.’ **Empathy with victims is the first step** in promoting understanding and acknowledging civic and political passions.

The following table shows the characteristics of the three different memory modes. it is based on a similar table in [Anna and Hans’ article](https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/files/116012882/On_Agonistic_memory_final_version_for_Open_Access.pdf):

| **Memory Modes / Characteristics** | **Antagonistic** | **Cosmopolitan** | **Agonistic** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Nature of conflict | Good vs. evil (moral categories), us = good, them = evil | Good vs evil (abstract categories), democracy/HR = good, totalitarianism = evil | Nature of conflict and violence depend on social circumstances, context and agency |
| Perpetrator/victim perspectives | perpetrator perspective presented as victim, us = victims, them = perpetrators | Emphasis on victims’ perspective on all sides | Learning from the memories/perspectives of victims, perpetrators, their party witnesses |
| Historical context | Self-consciously, unreflexive, monologic | Reflexive, dialogic, exposing the constructed nature of memory, consensually dialogic | Reflexive, dialogic, multi-perspectivist, exposing the constructed nature of memory, open-endedly dialogic |
| Empathy and emotions | Empathy with our past sufferings, passion of belonging, demonizing the evil Other(s) | Compassion for human suffering | Passions oriented towards collective solidarity, preparing emotions for democratic institutions |