

Interview with **Andreas Huyssen**

Trumpism as a social movement is a new form of fascism

Andreas Huyssen is the Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at *Columbia University* and an essential reference in the field of memory studies. His work has been translated into several languages and counts with such important books as *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995), *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) or *William Kentridge, Nalini Malani: The Shadowplay as Medium of Memory* (2013). In the following pages we talk with him about his career, about concepts like “urban palimpsests” but we specially deal with the current situation in the USA, the effectivity of the memory to face the extreme right, the relationship between art and memory (and its potentialities) or the current iconoclasm linked with colonial and slaver statues, among other actuality issues.



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1. Andreas Huyssen. Barcelona, 2016. Tere Estrada (EUROM)

2. Trump supporters storming the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. (Wikimedia Commons)

1. You have explained how, in Germany in the mid-1960s, when the twentieth century was barely studied in academia, and the Third Reich or the Holocaust were barely mentioned, the reception of studies by the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Benjamin, Löwenthal, Kracauer, etc.) had a strong impact because of the way they related cultural expressions to politics, art and politics, aesthetics and politics and so on. On the other hand, we have seen how, today, more than half a century later, the extreme right, linked to “Trumpist” circles, uses Frankfurt critical theory as a scapegoat for the United States’ cultural ills. Why? What goals are they seeking?

AH: The West German reception of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in the 1960s, by the generation born during or right after WWII, was indeed a major stimulant to the development of what since then has become known as the much-celebrated German Erinnerungskultur. Adorno’s 1959 lecture *What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?* is the canonical touch-stone in this context, but Kracauer and

Benjamin had earlier already explored how modern mass media like photography and film affected the structure of memory and perception itself.

The ways we remember fascism as a mass movement, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust became a key theme for me and others in the United States in the 1970s. It shaped our journal *New German Critique*, dedicated to debates about 20th-century German culture and politics. You can imagine our surprise when we discovered in the last decade how Critical Theory, in a completely mangled and distorted form, has become the *bête noire* of the alt-right in the United States. The Frankfurt School is cited as the gravedigger of American democracy. American higher education has allegedly been taken over by Cultural Marxism, which to the right wing culture warriors includes feminism, LGBTQ rights and critical race theory. You ask why? Well, isn't it always the Jews who are first targeted when things are perceived to go wrong? 'Frankfurt School' has become a code word in anti-Semitism. The meme of "Cultural Marxism" in turn serves the right-wingers' clarion calls to purge higher education, major sites of cultural diversity struggles. Following Andrew Breitbart, they define politics as downstream from culture, thus the American Right's focus on cultural issues. The ultimate goal: re-elect Trump and assert white supremacy.

2. Is Trumpism one of the fascisms of the 21st century? Where does that leave Republican conservatives?

AH: I think that the earlier debate whether Trumpism is a populism or indeed a 21st century fascism is over. Trumpism as a social movement is a new form of fascism. And terms like illiberal democracy, as championed by Orban in Hungary, are just verbal cosmetics. January 6, 2021 stands for what Hannah Arendt in her analysis of the Hitler regime called "the temporary alliance of the elite and the mob." Traditional Republican conservatives have been totally sidelined, even censored by the Republican Party, which is dominated by right wing

radicals and intent on minority rule via voting rights manipulations. One of the many signs pointing to fascism is the recently discovered script of a political take-over Trump has laid down in his elaborate plan to purge the non-partisan federal bureaucracy should he be re-elected. He called it Schedule F, which reminds me of Adorno's "F scale" in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), the fascism scale that identified key features of the potentially fascist personality. I'm not sure what the F stands for in the Trumpish mind. But Schedule Fascism is what it is. Under Nazi rule, it was called *Gleichschaltung*.

3. What tools can memory give us to combat the global growth of extreme right-wing parties and the democratic reversals they advocate?

AH: The major focus of memory culture in past decades were the victims of state violence, their suffering and trauma, and the transmission of that trauma to the post-memory of the subsequent generation. Witness testimony, mourning, memorials, counter-monuments and Truth Commissions were central to debates about dark histories across the world. Fascism itself seemed a thing of the past. At a time, however, when fascism is resurfacing in a new guise in many parts of the world, memory work has to turn to the figure of the perpetrator, to the structural dimensions which produce right wing radicalism grounded in everyday experience, and to the ways in which even bystanders are implicated in processes of cultural and political change they may abhor. Memory battles take a new, ever more antagonistic form. It is no longer just a question of unearthing an erased or disremembered past. It is a battle against right-wing historical falsification, illusionary nostalgias and conspiracy theories, in a word, against fake histories of past and present produced by right wing media top down, and social media bottom up.



3. A supporter kneeling in prayer at a 2016 Trump rally in Tucson. (Wikimedia Commons)



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4. Andreas Huyssen delivering the opening keynote of the conference "European Citizenship in Challenging Times: Remembrance". Barcelona 2016. Tere Estrada (EUROM)

5. William Kentridge, "More Sweetly Play the Dance", 2015. Video installation © Studio Hans Wilschut. Eye Filmmuseum

6. Shibboleth, Tate Modern, London. 19 October 2007. Nuno Nogueira (Wikimedia Commons)

4. In the current context of the strengthening of nationalisms and the re-nationalisation of politics, how do artistic expressions linked to memory – such as those of William Kentridge or Doris Salcedo– open up an alternative horizon and teach us to be in the world in a non-Identitarian way?

AH: Identity politics —sexual, political, ethnic, religious— has indeed become a plague today. The work of Kentridge, Salcedo and those other artists I discuss in my recent book *Memory Art in the Contemporary World: Confronting Violence in the Global South* is grounded in the memory politics of their countries, and thus national in this sense. But it stands against any and all nationalist phantasms, indeed against identitarianism of any kind, in the ways it opens up horizons of feeling and thinking that encourage cross-cultural connections and global solidarities. In the aesthetic forms, media and materials used, it makes us think differently about the world. While not activist in an agitprop sense of aesthetic production, it nevertheless confronts us with acts of memory that cut across cultural differences and are difficult to forget.

5. After your famous work *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), the concept of “urban palimpsest” was very well received. How did this concept come about? What were its main ideas? What role does it play nowadays in discussions concerning urban and architectural structures?

AH: It was my visceral experience of Berlin in the years after the fall of the wall that made me think about city surfaces and structures as palimpsests, analogous to texts rewritten, erased, written over in light of political history and the demands of the present. With the disappearance of the GDR and the simultaneous obsolescence of West Berlin as an island in the midst of a communist country, the city had entered a phase of radical transformation in which the traces of the imperial city, of the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich and the divided Berlin of the post-45 period were all up for grabs. Intense debates swirled around preservation, renovation, destruction, and tabula rasa new construction for what would be the capital of a reunited Germany. That led me to the idea of built space as palimpsest.

It indeed seems to be the case that the idea of the urban palimpsest has caught on in architectural and urban discourse. But I never considered it as a particularly original idea. The idea of historical layers resonated with Freud’s analogy of the human mind to the different architectural and historical layers of the city of Rome. Of course, there was the post-structuralist imperialism of the textual at the time. But I drew on a whole history of thinking the urban from Simmel via Benjamin to David Harvey. Applying a term from the realm of writing to built structure, however, was not an attempt to reduce the materiality of cities to mere text. Rather the opposite, it expanded the notion of text as palimpsest into material reality that demands to be read with all its gaps and erasures. The notion of the urban palimpsest permits us to read the seemingly static city as process and subject to permanent change.

6. What role do memorials play in urban space today? Are they useful for transmitting memories beyond the generation that raised them or, as Robert Musil said, are they condemned to invisibility?

AH: Memorials and monuments in urban space don't so much transmit memories as they point to memory clusters, conjure up past events, both triumphs and catastrophes, that still resonate in living memory in the public sphere. Since the 1990s, we have seen the rise of the counter-monument or counter-memorial that shunned traditional monumental form and commemorated not those who died for the glory of the nation, but those who were persecuted and murdered in search of political power, racial supremacy or nationalist phantasms of purity. But there is no reason why the counter-monument one day could not become as invisible as the traditional kings on horses or queens on thrones Musil had in mind.

7. What do you think of the iconoclasm that has affected different monuments dedicated to slavers and people from colonial history in various countries around the world in recent years?

AH: What is most interesting in the current iconoclasm directed against monuments to slavers and other figures representing colonial rule or, in the U.S, the confederacy, is that these are traditional heroic monuments rather than critical counter-monuments. They have probably been always more visible to people of color and former colonial subjects than to white citizens. The current iconoclasm is a sign of a healthy and robust debate about the injustices of the colonial past, which have recently been picking up in the U.S. as well as in Europe. Toppling a monument can be great fun, an urban celebration, a purging of a festering past, but eliminating it also makes it invisible, potentially eradicating a history from which one might still learn. I do think that celebratory monuments to

fascism, slavery or colonialism should be taken down. Otherwise, I favour strategies of redressing and refunctioning monuments in order to provide lessons of learning about the past. Certain monuments, as Paolo Vignolo has argued, can be turned into 'mockuments,' a counter-monumental practice, which colours a copy of the Statue of Liberty black, dresses a European queen up as an Andean woman or pokes carnivalesque fun at the heroes of Latin American independence struggles. They make a traditional monument productive for learning a history lesson by provoking its viewers to laugh and think differently about the figure on the pedestal and by undermining monumentalization itself. At the same time, neither destroying nor mocking monuments will ever be enough to deal with the legacies of colonialism and slavery. The debate about memorials and monuments may lead to difficult and urgent questions of restitution and repair and ultimately to demands for a different politics.

8. In the face of citizen protests, one of the most common responses by administrations is to opt for removing conflictive monuments from public space. These actions have, in turn, led to a trail of ruins, pedestals or empty, innocuous sites appearing in their place. What labour of memory is involved?

AH: As I suggested, eliminating a monument involves no real labor of memory. Removing a monument, say, to a museum may permit it to maintain its educational value. In itself, the monument is not a very subtle medium. It becomes successful only in relation to live memory debates in the public sphere. Thus one could say that the monuments to the confederacy in the United States, after slumbering for decades in blind oblivion, have become nationally successful in recent years to the extent that they trigger protest against the lingering racism in the United States. Their 'success' can be measured by the intensity of the demands to demolish them, which is in turn fed by the Black

Lives Matter movement, the 1619 Project, and critical race theory. And dismantled they should be to establish symbolic markers in the struggle against revisionist white supremacist nostalgias.

9. You have on occasion warned of the risks involved in transforming places of repression and torture into places of memory, which have then become enclaves for tourism—you have even spoken of “topolatry”. What are these risks? How should we treat these places so as not to fall into such risks?

AH: I do not underestimate the power of sites of torture, murder, and genocide to generate remembrance. The ESMA in Buenos Aires, Villa Grimaldi in Santiago de Chile or Buchenwald in Germany offer irrefutable evidence of state crimes. Memory culture in Argentina, Chile or Germany is no doubt stronger because these memory sites, created by pressures from civil society, prevent erasure and forgetting. Perhaps it was unavoidable that Auschwitz, given its centrality as a cipher for the Holocaust, became a center of genocide tourism. I would not want to disparage anybody who says they learned from their visit to the death camp, but we should be mindful that banalization and kitschification of historical catastrophes is an always present danger.

10. What do you think are the main challenges that a public policy on memory should deal with?

AH: I am deeply sceptical about legislating historical truth and I doubt whether public policy, articulated by a government commission, written into law, and designed to strengthen the memory of historical trauma, will ever be able to overcome the political battle lines in the present between those who want to remember past injustices and violations of rights and those who want to forget. Government supported memory politics may have worked in the past when public discourse was largely shaped by

mainstream print media and a limited number of radio and television channels. Prohibiting Holocaust denial and neo-Nazi propaganda has thus worked reasonably well in Germany over time in helping to create that *Erinnerungskultur* I spoke of earlier, but it has not prevented the recent rise of the AdF with its openly fascist vocabulary, dog whistle anti-Semitism, and unhinged conspiracy phantasies. The spread of hate speech and lies on social media platforms and right-wing news sites has required multiple legislative changes in Germany. Public memory policies seem even more necessary now than in the past. At the same time, we know that prohibitions always risk making the prohibited more attractive and more popular. And that popularity may grow exponentially via the internet and social media and create unwanted political backlash. The Janus face of public memory policy in Europe is even more evident if one considers how the nationalist government of Poland has enacted a law penalizing any mention of Polish complicity in Nazi crimes, thus distorting historical reality in the name of national honor and dignity. Here, public memory policy has been hijacked to support a radical historical revisionism rather than historical truth.

So let us not rely too much on memory legislation to determine public memory discourse. In the best of cases, it may yield its desired effects, but only if the agents of civil society, including public education, investigative journalism, and the arts, step up against attempts by right-wing historical revisionists to undermine democracy with denials of accountability, falsifications of history and nationalist nostalgias. Such are the memory battles of our time.