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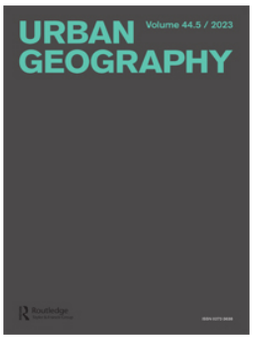

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DEBATES AND INTERVENTIONS

Synthesizing collective memory and counter-memory in urban space

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ABSTRACT

The June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests which took place at the Cenotaph and the Winston Churchill memorial in London triggered national debate in the United Kingdom regarding the roles that memorials play in urban spaces. Stoked by media sensationalism, public discourse and action became increasingly vitriolic in the weeks following the protests. This contribution to Debates and Interventions problematizes this divisive understanding of memorialization by demonstrating the relationality of collective memory and counter-memory, which ostensibly were competing rationales that drove the protests. By establishing collective memory and counter-memory as co-dependent concepts, this intervention proposes that their synthesis would enable the public to openly mediate their relationships with urban memorial sites and thus enrich our understanding and experience of contested urban spaces.

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Introduction

In June 2020, the Cenotaph and the Winston Churchill memorial, both located in the district of Westminster in London, made national news in the United Kingdom when Black Lives Matter (BLM) staged protests around them. The polarizing media coverage that ensued propagated images of division. Supposedly, two irreconcilable perspectives on memorialization, collective memory and counter-memory, were battling it out in the public arena. This contribution to Debates and Interventions challenges this dichotomous conceptualization of memorialization by proposing that, when synthesized, these two memory rationales can empower the public to take control over their relationships with memorialization in urban space. Drawing on the June 2020 BLM protests enables this intervention to explore how interactions between collective memory and counter-memory at traditional (hegemonic) memorial sites can produce tensions in urban space. This discussion in turn allows the case to be made that synthesizing collective memory and counter-memory at these sites can aid the reduction of these tensions through providing the public with a means of freely negotiating their understandings of urban space. This intervention is best

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viewed as a call for urban geographers to help improve the public's relationship with urban space through finding ways to synthesize these two operations of memory, thereby enriching our mutual understanding and collective experience of contested urban spaces.

Collective memory and counter-memory

"There is a deep politics to memory, and each age attempts to refashion and remake memory to serve its own contemporary purposes" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 443).

As the above quote from Mitchell (2003, p. 443) demonstrates, urban geographers have long been interested in how memory is reconstructed to serve the purposes of the present generation (Benton-Short, 2006). There exist two modes of thinking on how this refashioning takes place, and both lines of thought deal with how the public interacts with memorials in urban space. The first perspective, which can be called "collective memory", describes how intersubjectively shared interpretations of pasts are remade by social groups and powerful groups, like the state, to create singular, highly idealized images of the past (Halbwachs, 1992). This definition, which regards collective memory as the art of refashioning the past in line with the interests of present-day groups, has been recognized and utilized by urban geographers. For example, Alderman (1996) conceptualizes collective memory as a *battle of competing visions* of how the past should be restructured "in a way that will serve present social needs and ideological interests" (p. 56).

Perhaps no case study demonstrates more clearly that attempts to publicly reconstruct collective memory are subject to contestation than that of the June 2020 BLM protests in London. On 3rd June 2020, BLM staged a protest at the Cenotaph, Britain's national war memorial to the dead of the First and Second World Wars, and subsequent conflicts, in Whitehall, London. During this protest, a BLM protester named Astrophel Sang attempted to set the Cenotaph's Union Jack flag alight (Matthews, 2020). At a subsequent protest on 6th June 2020, thousands of BLM protesters descended on the Winston Churchill Memorial in Parliament Square, London (Somerville, 2020). Both protests were responses to the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man who was murdered by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, in Minneapolis, United States, on 25th May 2020 (Hill et al., 2020). The way that the British public reacted to these events can be connected to arguments put forth by geographers to explore how conflicts around collective memory can manifest in the public realm.

Geographers have further explored ways in which collective memory engenders a sense of affinity with one's social group. As Rose-Redwood et al. (2008) argue, collective memory is undergoing a period of revalorization, with many constructing places of memory which provide moral certainty during the narratively chaotic information age. As representations of traditional memorial themes like heroism, sacrifice, and nation, the Cenotaph and the Churchill memorial function as "temporal anchors" through representing the continuity of the core values of "the nation" (Huyssen, 1995, p. 7). It follows, therefore, that public reactions to what was perceived as a violation of this continuity were censorious. For example, responding to the protests, *The Sun* newspaper published an article quoting incensed Falklands veteran Kenneth Campbell, who claimed that Astrophel Sang "should have been jailed" ("Absolutely Disgusting", 2020). UK Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, Nick Thomas-Symonds, went further to propose legal measures against the perceived dissidence, backing the creation of a new law to protect war memorials (Tolhurst, 2020).

Making a cognate point to Rose-Redwood et al. (2008), Mills (2006) argues that, since collective memory is connected to the places where it is produced, and given that place is layered with meaning, sites of collective memory signify "the belonging of home" (p. 386). Sites of collective memory are therefore conceptualized by geographers as locations at which meaning, memory, and place coalesce to provide the illusion of a stable past "way of life" being real (Hebbert, 2005). Forming part of the British public's response to the protests were attempts to defend this "way of life" by far-right groups like the English Defence League (EDL). These involved hundreds of far-right hooligans staging "counter" protests and assaulting police officers at the Cenotaph and the Churchill memorial, which drew condemnation from Home Secretary Priti Patel (Turnnidge & Gray, 2020).

Urban geographers have also explored the ways in which collective memory influences the transmission of dominant ideas. Alderman (2002), for example, has investigated how the symbols, names, and commemorative activities embedded within schools communicate the accomplishments of previous generations and legitimize "identification with the natural order of things" (p. 605). Viewing such an identification as an inviolable social contract informed public responses to the BLM protests. This was demonstrated during the trial of Astrophel Sang, where Asma Bibi, whose grandfather was in the Indian Merchant Navy in World War II, read an impact statement. The statement read, "The Cenotaph represents people of all colours and creeds who stood up to the Nazis. I feel this person disrespected his ancestors too" (Duell, 2020). Underpinning this reaction is a sense that the "natural order", in which an identity that is grounded in the accomplishments of previous generations, has been violated.

Equally as significant is how the Cenotaph manifests this sentiment and grounds Asma Bibi's response to the protester. Arguably, the Cenotaph imbues public space with this historically grounded meaning through its abstract design. 1919, the year the Cenotaph was constructed, was a time of social and economic unrest. Amid such turmoil, the abstraction of the Cenotaph's design provided a "simplicity of purpose" which has informed its drawing of approval from successive generations of the public (Greenberg, 1989, p. 12). Indeed, the vertical planes and setbacks which define the Cenotaph's design provide "an added, almost exaggerated, sense of stability" (Greenberg, 1989, p. 12). Thus, when the Cenotaph was "attacked" by the protester, members of the public perceived this sense of stability, which orients their perceptions of place, identity, and nation, as being attacked (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004).

Other urban geographers have focused on the spatial dimension of collective memory, and how the location of commemorative symbols can influence how urban spaces are perceived. For instance, Benton-Short (2006) evaluated the politics behind the proposed installation of a World War II Memorial at the National Mall in Washington DC. Benton-Short (2006) argued that the memorial's installation would transform the National Mall, traditionally an active space for public protest, to a space for passive consumption of commemoration. Urban geographers, therefore, are well placed to understand the relationship between a collective memory symbol's location and the ways in which the public interact with and draw meaning from the urban space it occupies (Blokland, 2001; Dwyer & Alderman, 2008).

The second perspective which this intervention centers around concerns "countermemory", which is seen by many to be antithetical to collective memory (Harrowell,

2015). This is because counter-memory describes a process whereby marginalized groups stage acts of resistance *against* the official discourses of memory that are promulgated by the powerful groups that impose collective memory (Foucault, 1977). Geographers writing on urban public space have expanded on this conceptualization of counter-memory. Using examples of counter-monuments from cities around the world, for example, Cudny and Håkan (2019) list the key features associated with counter-memory sites. One feature is that counter-monuments promote multidimensional, rather than idealized, interpretations of the past (Legg, 2005). Nurturing the development of multiple interpretations means that counter-monuments can be used as tools for problematizing the dominant social order (Stevens & Sumartojo, 2015).

The location and form of counter-monuments enable such multidimensionality. Rather than occupying raised, prominent locations like traditional memorials, counter-monuments are often situated at ground level, and in everyday places like streets and parks (Krzyżanowska, 2016). This encourages intimate encounters, which primes counter-memory sites to invite people to recognize victims and sinister events (Stevens et al., 2018). Embedded within the concept of counter-memory is the notion that memory is always subject to contests over dominance and, as such, counter-narratives possess the potential to enter the public's consciousness (Rose-Redwood et al., 2008; Till, 2003). Counter-monuments not only provide a focal point for such resistance, but, through their form and location, make the discovery of such narratives an emancipatory endeavor (Harrowell, 2015).

The dynamic between collective memory and counter-memory

Urban geographers who have studied how memory operates in public space have not focused on instances where collective memory and counter-memory interact (Alderman, 2002; Benton-Short, 2006; Cudny & Håkan, 2019). As a result, a thorough analysis of the implications that such interactions can have for people's relationships with urban place is lacking in the urban geography literature. Gaining such an understanding would provide urban geographers with a platform to discuss how the public can gain control over these interactions for their own empowerment. By consulting scholarly work undertaken by geographers around these two perspectives on memory, clear dichotomies begin to emerge: marginalized versus powerful, official versus unofficial, imposed versus resisted, grandiose versus understated, elevated versus accessible, heroes versus victims, passive versus active, and so forth (Alderman, 2002; Benton-Short, 2006; Cudny & Håkan, 2019; Legg, 2005; Till, 2003). This dualistic view of how memory operates in urban space is problematic, incomplete and in need of correction.

Far from being opposing and exclusive operations of memory, collective memory and counter-memory interact in urban space, are dependent on each other, and can be more fully integrated to improve understanding of the public's relationships with urban space (Leitner et al., 2008). The June 2020 BLM protests at the Cenotaph and the Churchill memorial usefully demonstrate that a dynamic exists between collective memory and counter-memory. These memorials, which comprise part of Westminster's urban space, became sites of collective memory and counter-memory during these protests. The Cenotaph's status as a symbol of collective memory is owed largely to the rituals which surround it. Rituals like Armistice Day and Remembrance Day, which take

place around the Cenotaph each year, are examples of the state sponsored and publicly supported refashioning of memory which defines collective memory (Edkins, 2013). These ritualistic ceremonies influence the meanings that are constructed about the past and they, in turn, legitimize the foundational interpretations of history of the nation (Gedi & Elam, 1996).

How rituals operationalize collective memories demonstrates that memory is a social practice, produced by action. Being constructed by practice means that, when under attack, collective memories are defended in a practical manner (Zelizer, 1995). This could be seen when citizens gathered to "defend" Cenotaphs across the United Kingdom in response to the BLM protests. For example, on 13th June 2020, in the city center of Bristol, a maritime city in the west of England closely associated with colonialism and the slave trade, hundreds of people gathered around the Bristol Cenotaph, holding signs reading, "United to defend the Cenotaph" (Booth, 2020). Through their spatial permanence, Cenotaphs instantiate collective memory in place, imbuing the present with permanent projections of a shared vision of history (Edkins, 2013). The Cenotaph, therefore, is a site of collective memory. The British public's responses to BLM's protests, from calls for BLM protesters to be jailed to attempts by far-right groups to "defend" Cenotaphs, reinforced this fact.

During the BLM protests, the Churchill memorial became a site of counter-memory. Counter-memory was described by Foucault (1977) as a manifestation of counterculture, representing acts of resistance within sites of memory. Counter-monumentality, therefore, is the building of structures that challenge conventional conceptions associated with memorials, such as their permanence and grandiosity, through performative acts like inscribing messages onto memorials (Legg, 2005). In line with this definition of counter-memory, the Churchill memorial was recognized as a transitory structure when workers installed a protective barrier around it on 12th June 2020, amid another wave of BLM protests (Morrison, 2020). Furthermore, how one of the BLM protesters graffitied the words "Was a Racist" beneath the statue's "Churchill" inscription to expose Churchill's views makes the protests an act of counter-monumentality (Legg, 2005; Somerville, 2020). Therefore, during the BLM protests, the Cenotaph and the Churchill memorial became sites of collective memory and counter-memory respectively. As such, tensions between collective memory and counter-memory are what caused the varied responses to these memorials. It should be clear, therefore, that collective memory and counter-memory can interact with each other in ways that influence how people interact with and understand urban space (Pelak, 2015).

Furthermore, collective memory and counter-memory cannot be separated ontologically, for it is the case that counter-memory *depends* on collective memory. Consider Pelak's (2015) definition of counter-memory, "[the] contestations from below that challenge and oppose institutionalized or official collective memories" (p. 308). This definition demonstrates that counter-memorialization is a critical and reactive doctrine: it describes what should not be in relation to what is. By providing this critique, counter-memories enable collective memories to adapt to the needs of the present generation, and in turn maintain their power as a binding force for group identities (Frankel, 2009). Therefore, the collective memory-counter-memory dichotomy is flawed not only because the two memory operations can interact, but because they are definitionally and practically co-dependent (Burch-Brown, 2017).

Given their interest in interrogating the relationship between memory and urban space, urban geographers are uniquely placed to explore how this conceptual co-dependence of collective memory and counter-memory applies to, and manifests in, urban space. This line of thought could be developed by urban geographers providing analysis of how the conceptual relationality of collective memory and counter-memory has implications for how urban space is conceived of and understood. By making such contributions, geographers could advance knowledge of the dynamic that exists between urban space and these two forms of memory. Indeed, advancing this line of thought could enable urban geographers to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how urban spaces contribute to the evolution of collective memory and counter-memory across time.

Synthesizing collective memory and counter-memory in urban space

The optimal way to tackle the problematic false dichotomy between collective memory and counter-memory is to explore how these forms of memory can be aligned. To this end, what follows are examples of how collective memory and counter-memory can be synthesized in urban space. Synthesizing collective memory and counter-memory means that a collective memory (hegemonic) memorial and a counter-memorial inhabit the same memorial space. This intervention proposes two ways that this synthesis can manifest in urban space, though these options do not represent an exhaustive list of possibilities. Both forms of synthesis that are discussed entail installing a counter-memorial, which either encourages physical modification or deploys absence, within the same space as a hegemonic memorial.

One way that counter-monuments challenge hegemonic memorials is how they engage their subjects. Counter-monuments can warn of evil ideologies by encouraging memorializers to become performatively engaged with the process of memorialization (Stevens et al., 2018). The Monument against Fascism in Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg, Germany, demonstrates how counter-monuments can enable embodied confrontations of pernicious ideologies. The Monument against Fascism was a 12-metre-tall lead column which invited members of the public to inscribe their names onto it as a symbol of vigilance against fascism (Stevens et al., 2018). A defining feature of the memorial was that, as passers-by inscribed their names into, it gradually descended into the ground.

Installing a counter-monument which is similar in design to the Monument against Fascism around a hegemonic memorial like the Churchill monument could enable the public to confront crucial issues like racial oppression and marginalization. The problem with hegemonic memorials such as Churchill's is that they are didactic, conveying unambiguous messages onto the public; messages which are now being challenged (Stevens et al., 2018). Addressing this, in the proposed scenario, passers-by would be encouraged to inscribe messages which confront Churchill's views on race onto the modifiable counter-monument. The counter-memorial's invitation of inscription would encourage those engaging with the Churchill memorial "not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's [city's] feet" (Young, 1992, p. 277). Moreover, by encouraging memorializers to inscribe counter-memory messages, the memorial would confront Churchill's racism by legitimizing discourses of memory

which have been silenced by the presiding urban collectivity (Krzyżanowska, 2016). As Mitchell (2003) argues, then, the form, design, and invitation of modification of counter-monuments encourages memorializers to become "active producers of plural pasts and multiple memories" (p. 447).

Counter-monuments can also utilize absence, which is where a memorial possesses a lack of visual cues and symbolic representation (Watts, 2018). An example of an absence memorial is Kraków's Jewish Ghetto Memorial, Poland. The Kraków Memorial consists of thirty-three empty chairs which are situated in The Jewish Heroes Square, which was named Zgody Square during the Nazi's occupation of Kraków. The Kraków Memorial's chairs are regularly sat on by the public, forming a continuous civic presence through engaging with the performative and dialogical dimensions of memorialization (De Turk, 2017) Therefore, absence within a memorial structure, paradoxically, promotes presence by empowering passers-by, as social agents, to contemplate the history and relations of power which define the space that the memorial inhabits (Young, 1992).

Deploying an absence memorial within the same memorial space as the Churchill memorial could allow passers-by to grapple more thoroughly with the complex histories that define Churchill. By highlighting themes of disappearance, inversion, and immateriality, an absence memorial would stimulate memorializers to form their own conceptualizations of Churchill. A Kraków inspired chair would not command the public from above, as the Churchill memorial does, but would integrate into people's everyday routines (De Turk, 2017). This integration into the everyday would embolden passers-by to regularly perform their confrontations of silenced pasts around racial oppression by using the chair as a contemplative space.

As Summers (2022) contends when discussing the social implications of murals displayed in Oakland, California, to raise awareness of systemic racism, counter-hegemonic movements are transgressive by nature. This is to say that counter-monuments, as expressions of counter-hegemony, invite participation from "the very participants who are left out of the neoliberal city" (Summers, 2022, p. 13). Installing a counter-memorial which is physically modifiable or deploys absence would therefore transform the Churchill memorial into a dynamic urban space. In such a space, multiple interpretations would thrive and participants who would otherwise be excluded from the public discourse on memory would gain control over their relationship with and understanding of urban space (Massey, 1995).

Urban geographers can contribute to the advancement of collective memory-counter-memory synthesis through exploring ways that synthesis can be practically manifested. With contemporary discourse in geography moving toward discussions of how monuments which uphold racist narratives should be handled, advancements of practical ideas for synthesis could not be timelier (Lai, 2020). Discussions of the potential implementation of synthesis should, first and foremost, establish a strong case for the circumstances in which synthesis should take place. The scope of debate could then be narrowed, and discussion could focus on contemplating the types of synthesis that could be brought about at traditional memorial sites in urban areas. An essential part of these discussions will be considering the type of counter-monument, in terms of design, iconography, stature, symbolism, which could accompany the traditional memorial in question. Debates could then take place on the implications that synthesis could have for how urban spaces are designed and around which groups would have influence over the urban design process.

Conclusion

This Debates and Interventions contribution has endeavored to demonstrate that collective memory and counter-memory are not inherently opposing concepts. Through analyzing the events which unfolded as part of the June 2020 BLM protests at the Cenotaph and the Churchill memorial, this essay has conveyed how collective memory and counter-memory can interact at traditional memorial sites to produce tensions in urban space. Furthermore, by establishing the conceptual and practical relationality of collective memory and counter-memory, this intervention has proposed ways in which these memory rationales can be synthesized to reduce tensions in and improve the public relationships with urban space. Given how the materiality of urban features like memorials mediates social relations and daily routines, the public should play an active role in this regulation (Leitner et al., 2008).

The synthesis of collective memory and counter-memory allows the public to play this role, as this synthesized memorial form "presents the reader with a field of possibilities and leaves it in large part to him or her to decide what approach to take" (Robey, 1989, p. x). Thus, the idea of collective memory-counter-memory synthesis should be expanded upon by urban geographers for several key reasons. Firstly, this form of synthesis tackles the false dichotomy which has been created between collective memory and counter-memory, and in doing so tackles some of the causes of tensions in urban space. Secondly, and most importantly, synthesis represents a move toward empowering the public to regulate the social relations which drive and define them. Opening a dialogue around the ways that collective memory and counter-memory can be synthesized is therefore a crucial next step for urban geographers who wish to enable the public to mediate their relationships with urban space.

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