Colonial monuments and the treatment of history
The example of the toppled Colston monument in Bristol

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Introduction

Following the murder of U.S. citizen George Floyd by a police officer in May 2020, numerous demonstrations took place in the U.S. and Europe to draw attention to the unequal treatment and violence against black people. In the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, evidence of a hegemonic culture of remembrance was also attacked. In the United States, statues commemorating Confederate racism were toppled. In Europe, demonstrators focused on the legacy of colonialism and slavery in public spaces. Street names and monuments from the colonial era were publicly denounced. In the English city of Bristol, demonstrators lifted the bronze statue of slave trader and philanthropist Edward Colston (1636–1721) from its pedestal and threw it into the harbor during a demonstration on June 7, 2020.

Against the backdrop of this event, the question of how current debates about colonial monuments influence the colonial history and memory in the European discourse set in motion a change in the construction of heritage. Is an intervention, such as the toppling of the Colston monument an attempt to erase historical events from public memory, or is it an overdue correction of the European remembrance culture, which can be seen as a prerequisite for the concept of a shared cultural heritage? To explore this question, the case study briefly examines European colonialism and the model of cultural memory, then it outlines the role of the monument in the construction of collective memory. It goes to analyze the commentaries in the English newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* that reflect the public reaction to the monument collapse in Bristol. The findings show that the comments evaluate not only the concrete action and the treatment of colonial history, but also the monument as a medium of public mediation. In its conclusion, the case study discusses how the concept of shared cultural heritage deconstructs European memory.

European imperialism and colonialism

In recent years, the study of European colonial and imperial history has gained importance and attention. As colonialism was an international phenomenon, the research aims to examine transnational dynamics and interactions. A particular focus is on the British Empire and the memory of it (Conrad 2019). Distinguished from the concept of colonialism, imperialism is characterized as a relationship "in which one power exerts influence on others beyond its own borders" (Metzler 2018a, p. 5).[1] Imperialist ambitions go beyond colonialism. They pursue "world politics" with the aim of building a transcolonial Empire. An example of this is the British Empire from the end of the 18th century (Osterhammel 2009). Neither the long-term traces of imperialism nor European colonialism, however, have been eliminated with the political decolonization heralded in the 1950s as the "formal legal end[s] of colonial rule" (Metzler 2018a, p. 5). Rather, decolonization represents a longer historical process of replacement that, according to Metzler, "includes political as well as economic, social as well as cultural dimensions" (ibid).

The current preoccupation with colonialism mostly refers to the phase of high imperialism from the 19th century to the end of World War I in 1918. Although the British Empire as one of the longest and largest colonial projects lasted around 500 years, its reappraisal is also still in its infancy (Darwin 2015). When it comes to British imperialism, Darwin identifies three narratives in remembrance culture. Between 1945 and 1960, for example, the Empire was primarily told as a success story. In the 1960s, a turning point occurred, as uprisings in the colonies could no longer be covered up. In the 1970s, with a few exceptions (Hong Kong), the Empire seemed to have ended. Therefore, no one wanted to actively remember it (ibid). Since then, "the British public […] has been encouraged and reinforced to regard Britain's imperial career as a mission relatively successfully completed, but of little relevance to its present and future" (ibid). Throughout all three phases, however, two recurring remembrance narratives emerge: "a liberal narrative and a narrative of horror" (Erll 2015, p. 27), which were difficult to reconcile in public discourse.

Since the 1980s, when postcolonialism formed a new theoretical position that critically examines the West's view of the colonized world, the European "system of science and its asymmetries of power" (Schaper 2019, p. 11) has also been up for debate. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered a key text in this regard. Orientalism, which Said identifies in Western literature since the 18th century, designs the Orient and the people living there as fundamentally different from Europeans (Do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan 2020). Through foreign attribution (Othering), the Orient is established along with the "European positive counter-image" (Metzler

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1   For better readability, quotations from German literature have been translated into English. German sources are marked as such in the bibliography.

2018b). According to Schaper (2019), postcolonial theory goes beyond the geographical location in the territory of the former colonies. It makes clear that colonialism has shaped not only the colonial inhabitants, but also the colonial powers. Accordingly, "colonial power relations, categories, discourses, and ideas are not tied to formal colonial rule" (2019, p. 12), but to hegemonic behavior. Thus, structural racism extends into the present and still exerts influence. Examining cultural attributions used to underpin the colonial system is an important aspect of postcolonial theory. The "agency and perspectives of colonized population" (Schaper 2019, p. 14) considered with nuance, exploring complex power dynamics and sources. The goal is to critically examine and move beyond eurocentrism in all aspects. A postcolonial perspective on European colonial history involves taking a critical, deconstructive look at European history.

History, culture of remembrance and cultural memory

History as a "concept of meaning" (Rüsen 2013, p. 101) has two forms. On the one hand, it serves as a teleological explanation to "assert one's own cultural identity against others with strong arguments" (Rüsen 2013, p. 104), and to refer to a long cultural tradition. On the other hand, history can be seen as a "reconstruction" of the past. "Reconstruction means thinking of the past as a temporal chain of conditions of the possibilities of human world-making and connecting future expectations to this chain" (Rüsen 2013, p. 105). This orientation toward history is called historical consciousness. It arises when people relate to their past and "underpin their present self-understanding" (Wolfrum 2010, p. 16). The "social dimension [...] of time processing" (Wolfrum 2010, p. 17), on the other hand, has been referred to as historical culture since the 1970s (Rüsen 2013). A term that has increasingly been replaced by that of culture of remembrance since the 1990s. In contrast to the politics of history, which refers to a strategic field of action "in which various actors freight history with their specific interests and seek to use it politically" (Wolfrum 1999, p. 25), the culture of remembrance refers to "history in the public sphere" (Wolfrum 2010, p. 17). Accordingly, Wolfrum defines remembrance culture "as a formal generic term for all conceivable forms of conscious remembrance of historical events, personalities, and processes [...], be they aesthetic, political, or cognitive in nature" (2010, p. 19).

The term remembrance culture contains that of memory. In general, Erll defines "remembering as a process, memory as its result, and memory as a capacity or changeable structure" (2017, p. 6). A memory that selectively and subjectively stores memories is possessed by every human being. At the same time, it is socially shaped:

> What this memory [...] takes up in terms of content, how it organizes these contents, how long it is able to retain what, is largely a question not of internal ca-

pacity and control, but of external, i.e., social and cultural framework conditions (Erll 2017, p. 10).

Consequently, memory is not a purely internal phenomenon (Assmann 2005a) but reflects a collective socialization that relates to a common cultural framework. The idea of a collective memory, developed in the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs has been taken up by Jan and Aleida Assmann. They divide collective memory into two dimensions, communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory is shaped by everyday communication and connects three to four generations. Cultural memory exists not only in memories, "but also in things such as texts, symbols, images, and actions" (Assmann 2005b, p. 19). It is "not possible without institutions, media, and specialists [...]" (Assmann 2005b, p. 21) and serves as a "resource or source for group identity that relies on memories externalized in various archival media, symbolic forms, and practices, and thus becomes itself objectified forms of culture" (Levy 2010, p. 93). It is through a shared culture of remembrance and a shared cultural memory that a group's identity is permanently shaped. Rites (as immaterial heritage) keep memories and beliefs alive; storage media, which include monuments, transmit them in material form (Assmann 2008).

Whereas in Europe until the 1980s, successful events in national history were remembered primarily with the aim of "constructing a heroic self-image of the group" (Assmann 2008, p. 7), the nature of remembering has changed in the past 30 years. Remembering now also includes critical events that are fraught with pain or consequences and that presuppose dialogical remembering (Schober 2019). Leggewie and Lang (2011) have enumerated seven aspects of such a European remembering, with the memory of colonial crimes in fifth place. It results in an obligation to deal with and reappraise the colonial period (ibid). However, the memory of colonialism cannot be addressed solely within national borders, rather, "intersecting spaces of communication" (Erll 2017, p. 124) of global scope are the prerequisite. Levy also warns in this context that "what is remembered, how, and by whom is a matter of negotiation" (2010, p. 100). The contents of cultural remembrance emphasized by the majority society are not always understood or accepted without criticism by the population. "Cultural memory [...] can certainly also represent a critical, even subversive and revolutionary instance" (Assmann 2005b, p. 25), stimulate discussions or reveal the constructional character of history (Budasz 2020).

Colonial monuments in the public culture of remembrance

In a narrower sense, "any architectural or sculptural monument" is a memorial "erected for the purpose of commemorating events or personalities" (Riese 2009, p. 72). Zeller additionally emphasizes the "memorial function", the "setting in public

space and the monument's own claim to eternity, which results not least from the use of durable materials such as stone and bronze and steel" (2000, p. 20). In terms of content, "monuments often serve a public commemorative *agenda setting*" (Siebeck 2010, p. 177, emphasis in original) or "nation building" (Siebeck 2010, p. 178) to visualize political authorities, collective values, or power. Monuments postulate an "educational claim […] as well as – depending on the political climate – an attempt to influence or even indoctrinate recipients" (Zeller 2000, p. 20).

Their visibility in public space and general accessibility also lead to the fact that "monuments often [become] the object of disputes, not infrequently they are 'desecrated' or overthrown" (Siebeck 2010, p. 180). As artifacts handed down from past times, they are signs of a cultural or ideological self-interpretation that can run counter to the collective self-image at the time of reception: "People [make] here not only cognitive, but also emotional and physical experiences" (Siebeck 2010, p. 182). Consequently, meanings inscribed in the monument still have an unconscious effect on the population in the present.

This also applies to colonial monuments in the present. The memory of the colonial era not only influences the understanding of one's own past, but also the self-image of the former colonial societies in the present, which are working on their decolonization. Colonial monuments have been erected both in Europe and in the former colonies. Those erected during the active colonial period usually served to celebrate and legitimize colonialist ambitions – which they continue to express today. Those monuments that emerged after the loss of the colonies, on the other hand, "had the function of keeping alive the memory of the overseas 'world empire'" (Bechhaus-Gerst 2019, p. 40). But are these narratives still tenable today – or do they not rather run diametrically counter to collective remembering in the 21st century, as Darwin's and Leggewie's research on the dynamics of memory processes suggests? Budasz even explicitly points out that despite an expanded remembrance of colonialism in Europe, the media of cultural memory in the public sphere are often not adapted to the changing needs and messages of collective memory:

> The fact is that public space in Europe has not been decolonised, and nor have European minds. […] The absence of racial minorities among symbols of commemoration raises the question whether it is possible to be non-White *and* European (2020, n.d., emphasis in original).

Not only in Great Britain, but throughout Europe and the USA, monuments with colonial references were increasingly brought into focus in the course of the *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations. Lists such as the *Top 10 colonial landmarks in the sights of Europe's BLM protesters* (Paton and Dutton 2020) emerged, which sought to highlight colonialism as a structural mindset in Europe. However, a transnational and

academically edited compilation of colonial monuments does not yet exist (Budasz 2020).

The Edward Colston monument in Bristol

The monument by Irish sculptor John Cassidy (1860–1939) commemorating Edward Colston in Bristol was erected in 1895 and stood on a Portland stone pedestal until its fall on June 8, 2020. (Fig. 1) On the sides of the pedestal are plaques showing and describing Colston in various situations: "On the west face, Colston dispenses charity to poor children; on the north he is shown at the harbor; on the east is a scene with marine horses, mermaids, and anchors" (see Other Sources: No. 1). The plaque on the south side bears the inscription: "Erected by / citizens of Bristol / as a memorial / of one of the most / virtuous and wise sons of / their city / AD 1895" (ibid). Other streets and buildings in Bristol are named after Colston, who is honored as an important figure in his native city. He invested his fortune gained from the slave trade in charitable causes back home. However, his involvement in the slave trade is not mentioned on the pedestal. It was not until the 1990s that Colston's membership in the *Royal African Company* became public, bringing his role as an active slave trader into focus for the first time (see Other Sources: No. 1).

Nevertheless, it took some time before this aspect of his life became a reason to question the monument and to this day, citizens in Bristol seem to be divided about it. When the *Bristol Post* surveyed some 1100 participants about the Colston statue in 2014, 44% were in favor of removal, while 56% were opposed (Gallagher 2015). Since then, there have been constant efforts to address Colston's role as a slave trader in the public sphere and to deconstruct a one-sided memory. In 2017, for example, an unofficial plaque reading "BRISTOL Capital of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1730–1745 / This commemorates the 12,000,000 enslaved of whom 6,000,000 died as captives" was placed at the base of the monument, which the city removed after two months (Davis 2017). That same year, protesters painted the statue's face white (Wood 2017). It was not until 2018 that the Bristol City Council decided to add an official plaque to the monument that would address both Colston's philanthropic activities and his involvement in the slave trade (Cork 2018a). However, various attempts at wording the plaque were rejected after protests from the public and a veto by the mayor (Cork 2018b; see Other Sources: No. 2).

Shortly before the statue's fall in 2020, nearly 10,000 people signed a petition to Bristol City Council for its removal. The petition, which had been launched several years earlier, had received new attention in early June from the *Black Lives Matter* movement (Coward 2020). On June 7, a demonstration resulted in its unauthorized removal. The statue was lifted from its pedestal with ropes, rolled to the harbor, and sunk. In remembrance of George Floyd's death at the hands of police violence,

a demonstrator knelt on the neck of the recumbent statue (Siddique and Skopeliti 2020).

The two British daily newspapers The *Guardian* and *The Telegraph* reacted to the activist correction of public commemoration with numerous reports and commentaries published from June 7 to 11, 2020. In the following, the discussion about the toppled statue of Edward Colston in these two dailies will be used to trace how English-European colonial history and its monuments are dealt with in the British public.

Methods

The study is based on a document content analysis (Mayring and Fenzl 2019). A total of ten articles were researched via the online archive of the newspapers. The basis for the document analysis is formed by five comments made by writers of these newspapers, which show how rather progressive positions (*The Guardian*) and conservative ones (*The Telegraph*) wrestled in the public debate around the British people's own colonial past and its commemoration in public space. However, as newspaper publications, they should also be understood as proxies for the media's respective stances. All of the commentaries relate to Colston, but also go beyond the case and deal with colonial monuments in general. In the content analysis, therefore, broader and related arguments on the topic were also taken up and examined.

For the case analysis, a total of nine inductively formed categories were formed according to Mayring: RQ1-1: Approval (= arguments for monument overthrow and removal of colonial monuments); RQ1-2: Disapproval (= arguments against monument overthrow and removal of colonial monuments); RQ1-3: History, historiography, and politics of history; RQ1-4: Monument; RQ1-5: Black urban population/descendants & Black Lives Matter; RQ1-6: Politics: reactions and context; RQ1-7: Further Examples; RQ1-8: Solutions and Responses; RQ1-9: Identity and Memory and Engaging with Empire. Their evaluation and summary groups the following compilation into four categories: a) evaluation of the monument's fall, b) dealing with (colonial) history in public space, c) the monument as a medium of colonial history, and d) approaches to solutions in dealing with colonial monuments.

The public discourse: Contradictory commemoration?

a) Evaluation of the monument's fall: All commentaries offered both approving and disapproving arguments about the monument's fall. The authors of the more left-leaning *Guardian* were generally more in agreement with it, while those of the *Telegraph* were more opposed to it. The *Guardian* journalists were positive about the act of top-

pling: "The right way to do it" (Moore 2020), and "a revelation" (Muir 2020). Colston's influence over the city, the argument went, was diminished after the statue's removal, bringing Bristol's role in the slave trade back to mind (Moore 2020). Likewise, civil society learned to question its attitude toward its own history: "Every time a statue comes down, we learn a little more" (Riley 2020). The perspective of victims of the slave trade and their descendants was also raised. However, some commentators who were sympathetic to the toppling of the statue also qualified their agreement. Muir (*Guardian*), for example, declared on the one hand: "Finally, Colston has fallen," but added on the other hand: "Would I have tugged the rope? I don't think so. As attractive as it seems, as right as is the cause, that route seems ultimately problematic" (Muir 2020). The *Telegraph* writers argued more rigorously than their *Guardian* colleagues. No one, it was noted, should assume the right to simply alter public space. The monument toppling was declared a crime, the behavior of the police was objected to (Webb 2020). Habib (2020) referred to the protesters as "violent anarchists" and stated that "British heritage and values must be protected". Even if monuments refer to a negative past, they should not simply be removed, but should be remembered through encounters in public space: "It must be a part of our future, too" (Evans 2020). For most monuments, a reason for removal could be found, "but where would it end?" (Imam 2020). Therefore, their retention is right: "These statues remind us of who we were but also who we have the potential to be. In many ways, they symbolise a triumph over the kind of thinking that birthed people such as Rhodes [and Colston], since we now live in a radically different, more tolerant society" (Imam 2020). It is clear that some of the *Telegraph*'s commentary takes a contrary view to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, which claims that colonial continuities still persist today and promote racism.

b) *Dealing with (colonial) history in the public sphere:* Most commentators address the question of the mediation and politics of history and reveal their understanding of history. For the most part, the *Guardian* writers reveal a concept of history that relates the mediation of history in the public sphere to the collective culture of memory, and thinks of both dynamically (Moore 2020; Olusoga 2020; Riley 2020). "The past may be dead, but history is alive, and it is constructed in the present" (Riley 2020). In their argumentation they denounce the lack of visibility of the dark sides of English colonial history in the public space: "The fact that a man who died 299 years ago is today on the front pages of most of Britain's newspapers suggests that Bristol has not been brilliant at coming to terms with its history" (Olusoga 2020). Thomas-Johnson (*Guardian*) generalizes the argument and sees Bristol's monument collapse as a call to all of Britain to come to terms with its imperial past. Most Britons, he argues, still know too little about the imperialism of the Empire (Thomas-Johnson 2020). Olusoga and Moore (2020) interpret the moment of the fall itself as history. It is as much a part of it as the moment that once led to the erection of the monument (Moore 2020; Olusoga 2020). In contrast to the *Guardian*'s voices, most *Tele-*

graph writers were overwhelmingly negative about the impact of a changing culture of remembrance on the representation of (national) history in the public sphere, calling the protesters "historical revisionists" whose goal was "[a] distortion of our historical perspective" (Webb 2020). Instead of eliminating it, they claimed, it is more important to show more history in the public space and to leave people the freedom to form their own opinion (Webb 2020). Condemned is the assumption "that if we only removed, censored or reinterpreted parts of our past, that the problems of the present might be forgotten" (Imam 2020). It is not enough to simply remove a monument; rather, a deeper engagement with the time and the society of the time that had erected these colonial monuments is necessary (ibid). Thus, the voices in the *Telegraph* predominantly reveal an understanding that is oriented toward history as a concatenation of facts, whose relations are not to be corrected or judged in retrospect, but are to be accepted as the results of their time. The question of who was entitled to select events of history and their visualization in public space and whether this space is immutable is not addressed.

c) The monument as a medium of colonial history: On the role of monuments and works of art as instruments of representation and mediation, a less clear opinion can be identified. Olusoga (2020) argues, from the perspective of a heterogeneous citizenry which includes a black urban population, that a monument placed in the center of town, like that of Colston, was a "daily insult". The extent to which monuments are perceived by the population as instruments of a hegemonic interpretation of history, however, was not agreed upon by the writers of the newspapers. Sooke (2020) (*Telegraph*) put this argument into perspective by referring to the long history of monument overthrows and explaining that despite their location, public monuments are often invisible to the population because they are commonplace in the cityscape. In this, Riley (2020) from the *Guardian* agreed with him: "Statues do not do a particularly effective job of documenting the past or educating people about it". Moore, also from the *Guardian*, points out that the lack of political reckoning with Britain's imperialist past has led to a shift of the politically necessary discussion into the field of art and culture: "In this country, the reckoning with the days of the empire happens mostly on a cultural level" (Moore 2020). Habib (2020) from the *Telegraph* also takes up this aspect, but argues in a recognizably more militant way: the removal of the monument represents an attack on British heritage and its values. Historical statues, he argued, are part of the identity of a country and a population proud of its ancestors. The activists questioned this: "They are telling us that our forefathers were evil and that the values we derive from them are wrong, they should be rejected" (Habib 2020).

On the whole, the writers show disagreement regarding the evaluation of the effect of monuments for educational purposes. Their ambivalence results from the attitude of considering monuments not only as testimonies of history, but also of art. As such, they are part not only of a discourse of history, but also of a discourse of art,

which both follows a collective history of ideas and is an expression of an individual artistic achievement, whose significance should be judged separately – sometimes independently of its content.

d) *Approaches to dealing with colonial monuments:* Almost all of the comments deal with approaches to dealing with colonial monuments or respond to suggestions for dealing with them. Here, too, no uniform line separating the two newspapers can be identified. Rather, three approaches are individually advocated (or rejected) by the writers. First, the erection of "subject-specific monuments", such as a central monument to the victims of slavery; second, public discourse about historical monuments and their (possibly racist) ideological content; and third, the reflective mediation of monuments, such as through professional heritage agencies like museums.

The first approach is found in the *Guardian*, which proposes a "national memorial to the victims of the slave trade" and a "museum of empire" (Riley 2020).[2] The second approach is addressed by *Telegraph* writers, who refer to the work of the *Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm*, which was established by the London mayor Sadiq Khan in the aftermath of the monument's collapse (to examine London monuments for racist backgrounds). Three of the five *Telegraph* writers are skeptical of the *commission* (Evans 2020, Webb 2020). Habib (2020) even describes the project as "entirely wrong". He shares a similar opinion with Evans (2020) about the *Topple the Racists* campaign. The initiative provides a map of those statues and monuments in Great Britain that are said to have a racist context.[3]

Iman (2020) (*Telegraph*) advocates the third approach. For a reflective communication of history, even more monuments should be erected to subject historical figures to intellectual scrutiny: "I encourage the erection of more statues, museums, increasing the number of debate forums to place these historical figures under intellectual scrutiny". Olusoga (2020) discusses *Pero's Bridge* in Bristol, named after the slave Pero Jones,[4] and uses this example to demonstrate the solution of consciously marking European history in public space as colonial history. Sooke (2020) of the *Telegraph* goes a step further by wanting to move the dispute over the statue's colonial background and its fall into the reflective space of a heritage agency, the museum: "Moreover, to me, it feels right that, once dredged from the harbour floor, Colston's effigy should be resurrected not on its original stone plinth but inside a museum – where it can be properly contextualised, its toxicity assuaged". This shows that the

2   *An International Slavery Museum* already exists in Liverpool (see Other Sources: No. 3).
3   The interactive map, created with the help of crowdsourcing, was initiated around the *Black Lives Matter* movement and calls for adding more critical monuments in the UK (see Other Sources: No. 4).
4   Pero Jones had been purchased in 1765 at the age of 12 by wealthy slaveholder, plantation owner, and sugar trader John Pinney to work on his Mountravers plantation in Nevis. In 1784, he accompanied the Pinney family when they moved to Bristol. Pero was John Pinney's personal servant and served him for 32 years (see Other Sources: No. 5).

question of remembering is ignited by the image of history or the possibility of mediating blind spots in one's own culture of remembrance. The proposed solutions cannot be clearly assigned to any political direction, but oscillate between a positivist and a reflexive attitude.

The comments in the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* illustrate the disagreement in Britain about how to deal with its own imperial past. The narratives elaborated by Darwin, viewing colonial rule as both terrible and a fact, can be seen in these reactions. The different viewpoints illustrate that Britain is still struggling to interpret its history and legacy of the colonial period. At the same time, they make clear how important the term and the respective concept of history are for the collective identity not only of Bristol's urban population, but also of all Britons.

Final notes: Shared heritage as a correction of European remembrance culture?

The Colston statue was recovered from the water after it sank and was restored. (Fig. 2) The City of Bristol displayed the statue at the Bristol Museum from June 2021 to January 2022 (see Other Sources: No. 6). The graffiti marks left on the bronze sculpture on the day the monument fell were not removed, but remained on the statue (Adams 2020). At the former location of the monument, its reinterpretation has already begun. In July 2020, a bronze statue of demonstrator Jen Reid, her right hand clenched into a fist and stretched upward, was erected on the pedestal left behind. Reid had stood on the pedestal during the protests and had been photographed doing so. Based on this model, the artist Marc Quinn had realized the bronze sculpture together with Reid. One day after its installation, however, it was removed by the city of Bristol. In the meantime, the pedestal is empty again (see Other Sources: No. 7). A petition to replace the Colston statue with a black person was also launched the same day the monument was toppled (Grimshaw 2020). Suggested examples included Bristol's first black ward sister, Princess Campbell (1939), and Jimmy Peters (1879–1954), England's first black rugby player. By January 2021, some 76,000 people had signed the petition (Beeston 2020). Four activists who had been charged with involvement in the toppling of the monument and damage to property were acquitted by a Bristol jury in January 2022 (Thomas 2022).

Monuments shape the cityscape, convey attitudes, and can include or exclude people in their culture of remembrance. Even if monuments originate from the past, they enter into a dialogue with the present and must be considered against this background. Should colonial monuments therefore still be in cities? The presence of such monuments obviously has the potential to instigate a "culture war" (Mitchell 2000, p. 5), because public space is not a vacuum, on the contrary. In the case of the Colston statue in Bristol, this had been evident for years, but debate over extending the

inscription was unsuccessful. The toppling and reinterpretation of a monument finally expanded the (continued) writing of history in that a debate was initiated that called for new perspectives and approaches in dealing with the collective memory of the colonial period.

The removal of a monument from public space is thus only fruitful if it also gives rise to a critical discussion. The action in Bristol had this potential, and even had an impact beyond the borders of Great Britain. The debate surrounding the toppling of the Colston monument was representative of many other disputes conducted around colonial remains, and highlighted both European interconnections and their blind spots in the culture of remembrance. At the same time, this reveals a discourse about a delicate European heritage to which the term and concept of a shared heritage of humanity cannot be applied easily or harmoniously. The reason for this is the former hegemonic context, which to this day leads to exclusion mechanisms in the culture of remembrance – this becomes visible in the highly migrant urban societies of Europe, which require heterogeneous concepts of remembrance and revised self-interpretations.

Here it becomes apparent that in hegemonically shaped contexts and cultures of memory, the idea of a shared cultural heritage cannot function without conflict from the outset. Cultural heritage should not exclude people from the discourse of memory, otherwise it cannot have an identity-forming effect. The Empire, however, is part of English-European colonial history, which is remembered in Europe just as much as by the former colonies. That hegemonic behavior is still alive today was brought to awareness by the *Black Lives Matter* movement in 2020. Not least against such experiences of lived racism, the European narrative of colonial history should be reviewed in cultural memory and addressed in a multiperspectival way. An openness to active reassessment of the past would be essential here in order to expand the current culture of memory accordingly. In the reconciliation of contrasting cultures of memory lies a challenge also for the agencies of material heritage – which include monuments as well as museums – and their narratives. For example, the Colston monument could be not simply eliminated, but presented lying down or upside down. It could be embedded in an ensemble that recounts colonial crimes and racism, thus co-telling the darker side of European prosperity through expansion. Such a culture of remembrance could also provide educational outreach, for example, when it comes to combating racism (Zimmerer 2020). This critique of a historical self-understanding that hides hegemonic aspects, illustrated by the example of Colston, basically concerns all of Europe. Even if each European country has written its own colonial history, the practice of colonial exploitation was similar.

Fig. 1: The statue of Sir Edward Colston in Bristol, erected in 1895, photo from March 25, 2018 (Photo: Redsquirrel and Wikimedia)

Fig. 2: The blemished Colston statue in the M Shed Museum, Bristol, photo from June 8, 2021 (Photo: Adrian Boliston and Wikimedia)

Taking up this route, a united Europe could use its common colonial heritage to confront the rest of the world and its contrasting culture of remembrance, to come to terms with trauma, and to work on a narrative that understands colonial history as a heritage of humanity.

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