

‘It shows you that you’re not supposed to belong’:

Egalitarian assurance in the face of anti-egalitarian language and symbols

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1 Introduction

In 2021, after several decades of advocacy from local groups, a district council of the German capital of Berlin decided to rename a street because its name, ‘Mohrenstraße’, contained a pejorative term for Black people. It was to be renamed after the first philosopher of African descent to study in Berlin in the 18th century, Anton Wilhelm Amo. Residents and local organisations opposing the decision brought several complaints and lawsuits, which delayed the street renaming for several years until August 2025, when the new street signs could finally be installed. The opposition to renaming that underpins this dynamic is at the heart of this paper.

The original street name is an example of what I call anti-egalitarian public language and symbols (AEPLS). This broad category includes denigrating place names but also flags, commemorations, public holidays, etc., that are – in ways I will explore in this paper – inconsistent with social equality. In this paper, I approach AEPLS – and the question of what we ought to do about them – through the lens of relational equality. I argue that our response must be informed by the value of *egalitarian assurance*: individuals’ sense that their community is committed to treating and regarding each of them as a full and equal member of the community. I draw on the literature on tainted commemoration to develop this idea. In that debate, assurance is typically invoked to support the case for removing tainted commemoration because removal can help

provide *assurance* to members of subordinated groups that, contrary to what a particular commemoration might suggest, institutions¹ regard them as full and equal members of the community. However, what matters is not only the assurance that institutions can provide about the state's commitment but also the assurance that co-citizens provide of *their* commitment to equality. Opposition to efforts to remove AEPLS – as in the Berlin case – can *undermine* that kind of assurance. If egalitarian assurance is indeed to guide our response to AEPLS, this threat to assurance must be part of our deliberations: to the extent that removal of AEPLS is driven by a desire to strengthen assurance, states must consider not only how the removal affects assurance of their commitment to equality but also that of co-citizens'. This, I suggest, requires institutions to take a broader perspective on AEPLS, considering not only what to do about the commemoration in question but also how to make that decision and how the debate around it is framed, as these are crucial for how the broader public responds to removal of AEPLS.

The paper begins providing more details on the Berlin street that will serve as a case study for this paper (section 2). In discussing this case, I follow the suggestion that the term at the centre of the debate be written as M* rather than spelt out to signal that, because of its derogatory meaning, it is a term we should avoid (Institut für Europäische Ethnologie and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2022). The section also defines and describes the category of AEPLS. I then identify some key commitments of relational egalitarianism and trace their role in the debate about one sub-group of AEPLS: tainted commemoration (section 3). Section 4 reframes these relational-egalitarian concerns as ultimately grounded in what I call *egalitarian assurance*: our sense that the

¹ When I talk of institutions in this paper, my concern is with the state. While some of the arguments could perhaps be adapted for private institutions, such as universities, I will not address this here.

community is committed to treating and regarding each of us as an equal. This assurance can be about the state's commitments but also about our co-citizens' commitments. This latter kind of assurance is, I argue, undermined by certain kinds of opposition to the removal of AEPLS. Section 5 argues that, to meet their responsibility to protect assurance, institutions must take a broader perspective on AEPLS that goes beyond the immediate decision of what to do about them. In particular, as the case of M*straße illustrates, institutions may have to seek to reshape the debate about AEPLS and re-consider the decision-making procedures they employ to arrive at decisions about them. Section 6 considers some objections to my argument. I conclude by considering possible upshots of my analysis for private anti-egalitarian language and symbols.

2 Berlin's M*straße and AEPLS

The Berlin case, and the debate surrounding it, will serve as a case study throughout this paper. The name of the street (and adjoining metro station) contains the word 'M*', which has, for several decades, been considered a denigrating term for Black people, associated in particular with imagery of Black, docile servants. Activists have advocated for renaming since the early 2000s, and street names are frequently defaced. The location of the street – in the city centre, close to the Holocaust Memorial and the location of the Berlin Conference – has heightened the controversy.² The street name is problematic because it includes a denigrating descriptor of a particular social group. This issue is, of course, not unique to Berlin; place and street names around the world continue to include slurs.³

² For discussion of the location and its significance, see Rozas-Krause (2019).

³ See, for example, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-canada-government-epithet-idUSKCN0QF2AZ20150811>; Graham (2022).

In many countries, we now see a heightened sensitivity to how aspects of public space, including symbols and language, can seem to express support for, or insufficient condemnation of, injustice and inequality. The issue that has received perhaps the most sustained attention is that of tainted commemoration, i.e. commemoration (including memorials as well as statues, names or holidays that honour historical figures) that is tainted by its link to racial or other kinds of injustice. In this paper, I use the term *anti-egalitarian public language and symbols* (AEPLS) to capture these different cases.

A few points will help clarify the contours of this category. First, I adopt a broad understanding of language and symbols, which can include names, monuments, flags, anthems, holidays, etc. (Tsai 2016). Second, my focus is on symbols and language that are *public* in the sense that they were created or authored by current or past public institutions. (The conclusion briefly explores the implications my argument has for anti-egalitarian language and symbols authored by private actors.) Third (contra Tsai 2016), the language and symbols in question need not have been installed with the *intention* of conveying any particular message; I return to the issue of intent in section 4.1. Finally, by ‘anti-egalitarian’, I mean that the language or symbols in question are seen as reflecting, in different ways, the attitude that members of certain social groups (whom I call the ‘targeted group’) are not equals. Denigrating names, by definition, belittle or disparage members of certain groups; in the case of commemoration, it may be that a statue honours a perpetrator of injustice or celebrates an event that is closely tied to injustice. In other cases, it is the invisibilisation of certain social groups, as when national anthems refer only to a country’s male citizens. It is in this sense that in all these different cases, the language or symbols in question are *anti-egalitarian*. (Of course, determining whether a specific case is indeed anti-egalitarian is not always straightforward.)

AEPLS are increasingly scrutinised and in many instances, they have been removed or replaced, often following heated debate and against substantial opposition. What is at stake in this debate is, ultimately, equality of a relational kind: what do public language and symbols say about the social status of different groups? How can communities affirm their commitment to equality in contexts that are riddled with language and symbols that challenge or deny some groups' equal status? In political philosophy, debate on these questions has focused almost exclusively on the (narrower) issue of tainted commemoration. Much of that literature adopts, implicitly or explicitly, concerns of relational equality when assessing what precisely makes commemoration problematic and determining what institutions and/or individuals should do about it. The remainder of this section sketches some of the central ideas around relational equality before exploring how they have featured in the debate around tainted commemoration.

*2.1 Relational equality*⁴

Relational equality is best understood as an umbrella term that captures notions of equality whose core idea is that we must treat and regard each other as equals.⁵ This basic idea has been fleshed out in different ways.⁶ Some of the literature focuses on how, in a 'society of equals' (Scheffler 2003, 34), individuals would relate to one another. This often motivates an opposition to (certain kinds of) hierarchies (e.g. Miller 1997, Fourie 2011), including ones that subject

⁴ This section draws on Voigt (2020).

⁵ Some of this literature develops relational approaches in opposition to distributive accounts that define equality in terms of patterns of distributions (for example, of welfare or resources). While Elizabeth Anderson, one of the most influential contributors to this debate, sees these two approaches as fundamentally opposed and has argued that egalitarians must choose between them (see, in particular, Anderson 2010a), the more recent literature typically adopts a more conciliatory perspective that allows egalitarians to adopt both relational and distributive perspectives as part of a pluralist conception of equality (e.g. Lippert-Rasmussen 2018a, 2018b).

⁶ Not all the accounts I refer to here are explicitly couched in terms of relational equality.

subordinate groups to denigrating stereotypes (Anderson 2012). On such approaches, relational equality has implications for people's everyday interactions: if we relate as equals, we speak to each other in certain ways, for example, or 'choose friends according to common tastes and interests rather than according to social rank' (Miller 1997, 232). Treating people as equals might also require that we consider as equally weighty each person's agency (Anderson 1999, 312) and their interests (Hojlund, 2021, 4; see also Lippert-Rasmussen 2018a, 64; Hosein 2018, Anderson 2012). Relating to others as equals, then, is about our treatment of others but also our attitudes towards them.⁷

While these considerations apply to how individuals relate, the literature also identifies relational-egalitarian requirements applying to how *states* relate to citizens. States that meet requirements of equality will 'treat all its citizens equally in terms of help and hindrances' (Pogge 2004, 147) and be 'equally responsive to the interests and concerns of... all citizens' (Anderson 2010b, 2). But to meet standards of relational equality, states may also need to express certain attitudes (Anderson and Pildes 2000, 1508; see also Schemmel 2012, 2021a; Voigt 2018), in particular, a 'collective understanding of all citizens as equal members of the state, all equally part of "us", notwithstanding racial, ethnic, or religious differences' (Anderson and Pildes 2000, 1520, emphasis omitted).

In this paper, I am particularly interested in what relational equality requires states to do. Requirements of relational equality can apply to states *directly*: they must treat citizens as equals (e.g. Schemmel 2012). But we can also adopt an *indirect* approach: how can states create the

⁷ Not all relational egalitarians agree about the role of attitudes; see Schemmel (2012), Bengtson and Munch (forthcoming).

conditions for citizens⁸ to relate as equals? This latter idea, I will suggest, complicates how institutions ought to approach AEPLS.

Finally, self-respect, which I take to be an understanding of oneself as an equal, is a concern for many relational egalitarians.⁹ While some relational egalitarians see self-respect as definitionally required by relational equality (e.g. Wolff 2015, 24; Miller 1997, 199; Fourie 2015, 88), others emphasise a causal relationship between relational equality and self-respect: relational equality matters *because* it promotes self-respect (Scheffler 2005, 19). Finally, states may have obligations to provide the sources of citizens' self-respect (Schemmel 2019, 2021b). The latter two ideas feature prominently in the literature on tainted commemoration.

2.2 *Relational equality and tainted commemoration*

As I mentioned earlier, political philosophers' contributions to the larger debate on AEPLS have focused on the issue of tainted commemoration. This literature, implicitly or explicitly, invokes relational-egalitarian considerations.¹⁰ First, much of the literature ties the wrongness of tainted commemoration to the inequalitarian attitudes it expresses.¹¹ Frowe (2019, 3) explains that what makes statues of figures involved in historic injustice problematic is that they 'typically express

⁸ The literature is ambiguous as to whether the concern is with citizens or with individuals more broadly. I will talk here of 'citizens' to capture the group of people for whom the state can be said to be directly 'responsible'; this oversimplifies because the state has responsibilities to non-citizens.

⁹ Here, the literature often draws on Rawls's arguments about self-respect and the need for just institutions to provide the bases of self-respect for citizens. Note, however, that Rawls's understanding of self-respect (e.g. Rawls 1999, 386) differs from that adopted in the relational equality literature.

¹⁰ Archer (2024) identifies two strands in the philosophical debate around tainted commemoration: one focuses on the harms caused by such commemoration, the other on disrespect. My focus here is on this second strand. I prefer the language of equality over that of respect to help anchor my discussion in the broader egalitarian debate. Archer's mapping should not obscure the fact that disrespectful treatment can, of course, also create harms – including effects on self-respect.

¹¹ The accounts discussed here differ on how they spell out what precisely makes it the case that a specific commemoration is objectionable. Since the aim of this section is to clarify the role of relational-egalitarian considerations in the debate, these disagreements do not matter for my purposes.

positive evaluative attitudes towards that figure'. Schulz (2019, 169) argues that commemorations constitute a moral wrong when they degrade by expressing a disrespectful ideology – that is, an ideology that denies some citizens the status of 'someone equally capable of giving and demanding reasons' – and when that ideology is connected to an existing, wrongful social hierarchy. Lai (2020, 604), building on Schulz, explains that 'tainted political symbols express derogatory messages' and 'can convey the inferiority of certain groups by saluting, glorifying, or honoring an unjust oppressor or ideology'. Focusing on monuments tied to racial injustice, Bell (2022) emphasises that understanding how, precisely, such monuments wrong requires an assessment of the attitudes they express.

Second, the literature emphasises that we must respond to tainted commemoration by explicitly rejecting the inegalitarian attitudes it expresses and/or by expressing appropriate attitudes ourselves, particularly a commitment to the equal status of the members of the targeted group. This typically means removing tainted commemoration, so as to 'disavow certain attitudes and beliefs' (Frowe 2019, 15) or to 'communicate[] a firm repudiation of the rationale of previous injustices, and a commitment against their continuation' (Burch-Brown 2017, 87). It may also require 'actively reshap[ing]' (Schulz 2019, 174) the commemorative infrastructure, for example by adding new statues and monuments, depending on which approach 'will further rather than frustrate relations of respect' (Schulz 2019, 185). In particular, when societies are already committed to a 'wider process of working through the past that the commemoration is connected to' (Schulz 2019, 177), contextualising the monument may be more conducive to restoring relations of respect than removal.

Other contributions to the debate focus on what individuals, rather than public institutions, should do about tainted commemoration. Several philosophers recommend that, in the absence of

an institutional response to tainted monuments, individuals engage in vandalism, as a form of counter-speech to the problematic messages expressed by the commemoration (Lai 2020, 608) or to ‘directly repudiate the views of the tainted commemoration’ (Lim 2020a, 208). Bell (2022, 788), too, views defacement as the appropriate response because it ‘send[s] the message that ... the racism of the past that was once glorified and celebrated is now seen as low and worthy of (apt) contempt’.

Finally, concerns about *self-respect* reoccur throughout the debate. For Schulz (2019), the second main way in which commemoration can wrong is when it is part of a commemorative infrastructure that denies some community members the sources of self-respect. Similarly, Lim (2020a, 192) suggests that the best way to understand activists’ calls for removal of tainted commemoration is ‘as a demand to secure self-respect’. Underlying Bell’s arguments, too, is a concern for self-respect and the background conditions it requires: ‘racist memorials wrong when they undermine the social conditions necessary for self-respect by publicly expressing inapt contempt for members of racially stigmatized groups’ (Bell 2022, 78).

This discussion identifies different mechanisms through which tainted commemoration conflicts with relational equality. These arguments can be extended to the broader category of AEPLS: the expression of anti-egalitarian attitudes helps explain what makes AEPLS problematic and why our response to them must involve the expression of our commitment of equality – typically by removing or defacing the AEPLS in question. These concerns in turn are tied to the

self-respect of members of the targeted groups: self-respect is threatened by the expression of anti-egalitarian attitudes and bolstered by the expression of egalitarian commitments.¹²

3 Attitudes and assurance

This section suggests a reframing of these relational-egalitarian concerns in terms of the notion of assurance: by expressing opposition to egalitarian commitments, AEPLS undermine assurance; communities' response to them must seek to re-establish assurance. I then argue that a negative response to efforts to remove AEPLS can powerfully undermine assurance. An assurance-based approach to AEPLS, therefore, does not necessarily support the prescriptions the literature proposes.

Readers will likely remember that after the city of Charlottesville, Virginia, proposed in 2017 to remove the local statue of Robert E. Lee, white supremacists assembled in the town as part of the Unite the Right rally, shouting racist, antisemitic and Islamophobic slogans and carrying symbols such as Confederate battle flags. After the rally was declared unlawful, one participant rammed their car into a group of counter-protestors, causing the death of Heather Heyer, and injuring several others.

The case of Berlin's M*straße is instructive in that the response to calls for renaming were far less extreme and (hopefully) more typical of what happens in cases when tainted commemoration is to be removed. The response was dominated by a sense that the renaming was unimportant, that the argument was based on emotion rather than rational argument, and that

¹² I do not assess these claims here. Schulz, Lim and Bell seem to assume but do not explicitly defend that the disrespect expressed by problematic commemoration can undermine the self-respect of members of the targeted group. Schemmel (2019, 2021a, 2021b) defends a view of self-respect and its relationship to experiences of disrespect that does not support this assumption (for a response to Schemmel, see Stoljar and Voigt 2021).

renaming the street would lead down a slippery slope of absurd name changes. Mocking and jokes were frequently part of this response.¹³

One of the activists involved in calls to rename several Berlin streets describes their response to the residents' indifference and unwillingness to engage with concerns about tainted commemoration. They explain that the AEPLS in question (in this case, streets named after perpetrators of colonial injustice) are a 'slap in the face'; what is more, when activists' resistance to these names and their calls to have them changed are simply brushed off, 'it shows you that you're not supposed to belong' (quoted in Rothe 2020, my translation).

I want to analyse this response by focusing on the ideas of egalitarian assurance and egalitarian uncertainty, which underpin the egalitarian analysis of tainted commemoration. Schulz explains that egalitarian societies can provide assurance 'by establishing social practices and institutions that are expressive of the idea that all persons have equal standing in the moral community' (Schulz 2019, 173). Appropriate commemoration can contribute to this broader objective. Conversely, tainted commemoration undermines assurance by

introduc[ing] uncertainties about whether the community genuinely and fully respects and regards members of a certain group as equals. This uncertainty constitutes insecurity in the sources of their self-respect. (Lim 2020a, 192)

The expression of egalitarian attitudes (by commemorations, citizens, institutions...) undergirds assurance; expression of *inegalitarian* attitudes calls that assurance into question and creates uncertainty about one's social status. It is these mechanisms that, the arguments in the tainted commemoration debate contend, positively or negatively affect the self-respect of the targeted groups.

¹³ Including being the butt of an April Fool's joke: <https://entwicklungsstadt.de/nach-langjaehrigem-streit-mohrenstrasse-in-berlin-mitte-wird-umbenannt/>

What exactly is the kind of assurance at stake here? There is some discussion of assurance in the literature, but it is typically tied to concerns broader than relational equality, such as violations of social norms (Walker 2006) or commitment to principles of justice (Waldron 2010, 2012). The kind of assurance that matters from the perspective of relational equality concerns individuals' sense that their community is committed to treating and regarding each of them as an equal. From a relational egalitarian perspective, the relevant commitment is two-fold. First, it involves the recognition of individuals' basic equality. Motchulski (2025, 91) explains this aspect of assurance in terms of recognition respect, which, he notes (building on Darwall, 1977), requires viewing others as 'having equal fundamental moral standing, which involves recognition of the person as counting, morally speaking, for their own sake, taking this fact into account in one's deliberation, and constraining one's conduct accordingly'. In addition, since relational equality is also about membership in the community and a commitment to viewing all citizens as 'equally part of "us"' (Anderson and Pildes 2000, 1520), the second relevant commitment for assurance involves that of others' recognition of one's group as full and equal members of the community. This status can be called into question when, for example, parts of the community seem to tolerate, welcome or even protect expressions of the unequal status of some groups (including AEPLS), or when concerns expressed by the relevant groups are dismissed (cf. Walker 2006, 131-133). (I return to the ways in which assurance can be undermined in the context of AEPLS below.)

While political philosophers often see the value of assurance in its role for facilitating social stability over time (cf. Waldron 2010, 1620, drawing on Rawls 1999), assurance also has a more immediate impact on people's lives. Not only does it, as just mentioned, impact the degree to which they feel they are viewed as full and equal members of the community, it also undergirds their sense of basic security as they go about their daily lives: knowing that others regard us as

equals makes us confident that they will treat us with respect. As Waldron emphasises, assurance allows people to

know that when they leave home in the morning they can reasonably count on not being discriminated against, humiliated, or terrorized. They feel secure in the basic rights that justice defines; they can face social interactions without the elemental risks that interaction would involve if one could not count on others to act justly. (Waldron 2010, 1626)

Conversely, when assurance is undermined or diminished, individuals face what I call *egalitarian uncertainty*.

Importantly, assurance can have different sources. For Waldron, assurance operates primarily on an interpersonal level: it is the assurance of their *co-citizens'* commitment to the principles of justice that provides the basis on which people can feel safe in their day-to-day life. Hate speech in public spaces undermines assurance precisely because it demonstrates (some) co-citizens' failure to recognise the targeted group as equals. Even if the state successfully protects members of the targeted group from mistreatment, this does not re-establish assurance:

When a society is defaced with anti-Semitic language, burning crosses, or defamatory racial leaflets, ... assurance evaporates. A vigilant police force and Justice Department may still keep people from being attacked or excluded, but people no longer have the benefit of a general public assurance to this effect, provided and enjoyed as a public good, furnished to all by all. (Waldron 2010, 1626)

In Waldron's account, hate speech legislation therefore is a way for states to enforce *individuals'* responsibility to refrain from undermining assurance (Waldron 2010, 1629-30). At the same time, of course, as mentioned in section 2, the state itself can be a source of assurance for citizens: Legislation and state action more broadly can express the state's commitment to treating all its citizens as equals. But this is assurance of the *institutions'* commitment to their equal status, not that of co-citizens' commitment.

This, then, leaves us with two sources of egalitarian assurance (and uncertainty): the state and co-citizens.¹⁴ I will call these kinds of assurance institutional assurance (or uncertainty) and civic assurance (or uncertainty).

Put in these terms, we can parse out the problem with AEPLS more clearly. First, their mere presence can undermine institutional assurance. Institutional assurance is further undermined when institutions refuse to remove AEPLS or restore them after defacement by private individuals (see also Rossi 2020). Second, removal and contextualisation of the commemoration are ways for institutions to strengthen institutional assurance by expressing their commitment to the equal status of the targeted group. Citizens, in turn, can use defacement or vandalism of AEPLS to enhance civic egalitarian assurance.

When the notion of assurance features in the literature on tainted commemoration, it requires institutions to remove or (under certain conditions) contextualise tainted commemoration and/or individuals to deface or vandalise such commemoration (or at least it gives rise to a strong presumption in favour of such moves).¹⁵ What this assessment misses is the possibility of *civic uncertainty* and the range of actions and attitudes that can lead to it.

	institutional	civic
assurance	Removal of AEPL, contextualisation	Defacement, vandalism, protest, petition for change
uncertainty	Presence of AEPL; institutions fail to remove, clean/repair after defacement	<i>Negative response by co-citizens to calls for removal; protect from or clean after defacement</i>

¹⁴ This distinction is glossed over in the tainted commemoration debate, e.g. when Schulz speaks of ‘society’ or Bell talks about the ‘community’ and how they should respond to tainted commemoration.

¹⁵ This is the case for Schulz (2019), Rossi (2020), Bell (2022), Lim (2020a, 2020b), Lai (2020), Burch-Brown (2017).

To illustrate, let's return to the different responses with which calls for removal of tainted commemoration can be met, taking the Unite the Right rally and the dismissive response in the Berlin case as two examples. Those participating in Unite the Right rally express their commitment to hateful ideologies and reasonably cause members of the targeted groups to feel uncertain about whether their co-citizens see them as full and equal members of the community: 'the public show of hatred is aimed at undermining the assurances that are critical to the basic social standing of members of oppressed groups' (Rossi 2020, 59). For members of the targeted groups, speech of this kind, as Waldron emphasises when assessing the effects of hate speech, leads to reasonable fears about personal safety and thus gravely undermines civic assurance.

The Unite the Right rally shares important features with Waldron's hate speech. But other, less extreme, actions by citizens may have similar effects. For example, citizens may (as I was told during a 2019 visit happens in Selma, Alabama) organise volunteers to protect the local Confederate monument from defacement. Similarly, the concern of the Berlin activist, quoted above, is that the dismissive response they received gives them the sense that they are not seen as a full member of the community.¹⁶

Unlike in the case of the Unite the Right rally, the threat here is not about violence or physical safety but about indifference to the interests of the targeted group and an unwillingness to engage with their concerns. These attitudes reflect, at least in part, a failure to see activists' calls as a concern about their equal status and full membership in the community or an unwillingness to give this fundamental interest in being seen and treated as an equal appropriate weight in their

¹⁶ While it is ambiguous in the article (Rothe 2020) whether the activist is referring to the dismissive response by citizens (especially residents of the streets that were to be renamed) or the municipality or both, the context suggests that residents' reactions are at least in part what drives their reaction.

deliberations. Taken on its own, this is, of course, a less problematic response than the attitudes voiced at the Unite the Right rally. But it is still a violation of the requirements of relational equality. Moreover, the dismissive response is – unlike the Unite the Right rally – more likely to be widespread or even (as with M*straße) part of the mainstream debate. This could allow it to have a significant impact on civic assurance, even if the content of the attitudes is less problematic than in the case of white supremacist protests. Whereas for Waldron, hate speech restrictions strengthen civic assurance by correcting the (false) impression that hate-speakers are anything other than ‘isolated, embittered individuals’ (Waldron 2012, 95), this may not be true of the dismissive responses that often meet calls for removal of AEPLS.

Importantly, then, civic assurance can be undermined not only by clearly hateful speech, as in Waldron’s example, but also in cases where the underlying attitudes seem much less problematic and do not amount to clear and straightforward expressions of disrespect. Some of the examples discussed in the next section will help clarify some of these more subtle mechanisms through which civic assurance can be undermined. At the same time, of course, not all opposition to removal of AEPLS undermines civic assurance. Opposition that gives appropriate weight to the interests of the targeted social groups and engages respectfully with the arguments supporting removal, does not reflect inegalitarian attitudes and therefore does not threaten assurance. For example, arguments suggesting that in certain instances AEPLS should be left in place so they can act as visceral reminders of the injustice in question and therefore contribute to greater equality, could fall into this category. By the same token, if some citizens were to agree with calls for removal of certain AEPLS but did so for *inegalitarian* reasons, this could undermine civic assurance: imagine, for example, that some citizens opposed the street name M*straße because they don’t want streets to reflect the presence of Black people in Germany (cf. the Nazis’ removal

of street names that reflected the presence of Jewish citizens). Even if the relevant determinations are not straightforward to make in specific cases, the relevant question is whether the attitudes expressed by or reflected in these responses are consistent with requirements of relational equality.

What does this mean for the state and its obligations? States face two distinct requirements vis-à-vis assurance: they must provide institutional assurance by expressing certain attitudes, but they must also concern themselves with civic assurance (this latter role is what motivates Waldron's argument for hate speech legislation). To use the language of direct and indirect requirements of relational equality introduced in section 3.1, relational equality can require states to offer *institutional* assurance (a direct requirement) but there is also the indirect requirement to enhance egalitarian relations among citizens, by strengthening *civic* assurance.

With these aspects of egalitarian assurance in view, several features of AEPLS become clearer. First, a concern for assurance shifts our focus away from the attitudes expressed by AEPLS themselves towards attitudes held by citizens and institutions. AEPLS are often created in the past and reflect primarily the attitudes and commitments of the institutions and/or citizens that created them. To the extent that we are concerned about egalitarian assurance, however, the relevant question is about *current* institutions' and co-citizens' attitudes: do *they* regard all citizens as full and equal members of the community? Even if they do not endorse the ideology, how important do they think it is for the state or individuals to explicitly repudiate it, relative to other pressing concerns? The most powerful cause for egalitarian uncertainty, then, is not the AEPLS themselves but how citizens and institutions view them and what they express.¹⁷

¹⁷ This also helps us provide an alternative argument for Schulz's point that in cases where there is a thorough process of 'working through' the historic injustice in question, it may be more appropriate to contextualise a commemoration rather than remove it (Schulz 2019, 179-180). My account would focus on what that process of reckoning with the ideology in question says about *current* attitudes, by citizens as well as institutions: to the extent that a public process

Second, assurance (both institutional and civic) may be harder to establish for historically marginalised groups than for those who have not experienced challenges to their status: on the back of a history of unequal treatment, or of certain groups not being regarded as (full) citizens, more effort may be required to provide assurance.¹⁸ AEPLS become a particular focal point whenever the injustice with which they are connected becomes particularly salient (the focus of Confederate monuments during the Black Lives Matter protests is a case in point). Similarly, in the Berlin case, the fact that Germany's history of colonial injustice remains unacknowledged reasonably heightens the sense that anti-Black racism contributes to the reluctance to rename streets such as M*straße. Descriptions of activists in local newspapers as 'mostly dark-skinned' but confident, highly educated and 'speaking excellent German' (Adam-Tkalec 2016) may also bring home to Black Germans not only that anti-Black stereotypes are alive and well in mainstream society, but also that in a country where conceptions of citizenship are notoriously tied to ethnicity, the idea of a Black German still strikes many as counterintuitive: they are *literally* not seen as members of the political community.¹⁹

Finally, while both civic and institutional assurance are important, Waldron's analysis points to important features of civic assurance and its relationship to institutional assurance. It is insufficient for the state to ensure the physical safety of the groups targeted by hate-speakers because there can be no *full* assurance of safety if citizens are not *also* committed to upholding

of 'working through' historic injustice already provides assurance of institutions' and citizens' rejection of the unjust ideology, removal may not be required for assurance.

¹⁸ Historic injustice may also affect *how* states can provide institutional assurance; see Waligore (2015).

¹⁹ Miller-Idriss (2006) offers a brief account of developments in German citizenship legislation as well as the results of interviews with young Germans in Berlin on their notions of citizenship. While the ethnic understanding of citizenship was a minority view among respondents, its enduring power was apparent in the interviewees' responses. One 'non-ethnic' German respondent explained that despite being born in Germany, he was not accepted as German, to the point where people would laugh at him for saying that he felt German (559). One 'ethnic' German reported having been insulted for being a 'foreigner', on account of his dark hair and dark eyes (560).

everyone's safety: 'In no society is [the] state able to offer these guarantees [of physical safety] on its own account without a complementary assurance that ordinary citizens will play their part in the self-application of the law' (Waldron 2012, 98). This suggests that in seeking to address AEPLS, institutions face a trade-off between different kinds of assurance: removal can help strengthen *institutional* assurance but co-citizens' negative or dismissive response to such efforts can undermine *civic* egalitarian assurance. It doesn't follow from this that states should not rename streets or take down statues. But if egalitarian assurance is one of the concerns that should guide how we engage with AEPLS, we must take seriously both institutional and civic assurance. A negative or dismissive response to removal of AEPLS may, then, give rise to pro tanto reasons of equality that speak *against* removal. I return to this below.

4 Responding to AEPLS while protecting civic assurance

My concern in this paper is the state's role in strengthening egalitarian assurance. States need to deal with AEPLS so as to assure members of the targeted group that, contrary to what the AEPLS may express, they are seen as full and equal members of the community. By the same token, individual citizens may use defacement or vandalism to strengthen what I called *civic* assurance. However, as I explained in the previous section, we must also take into account the civic egalitarian uncertainty created by negative responses to efforts to remove AEPLS. To the extent that our concern about AEPLS is about assurance, all these effects must be part of the equation.

But there might be things states can do to mitigate the negative effects that removal can have on civic assurance. One upshot of the previous discussion is that institutions must take a broader perspective on AEPLS that reflect concern for the different sources of egalitarian

assurance, and how these might be affected not just by the removal of AEPLS but also as a result of decision-making procedures used to arrive at the removal decision and public debates about these decisions. In particular, the debate surrounding AEPLS and what to do about them should receive explicit attention because it offers ample opportunity for inegalitarian views to be expressed. Similarly, some procedures used to decide what to do about AEPLS can undermine civic assurance. If institutions are, as I think relational egalitarians would recommend, concerned with egalitarian assurance, they must try to shape the debate and to choose decision procedures in ways that strengthen, or at least not undermine, civic assurance. As I suggested above, this is part of an indirect requirement of relational equality that falls on institutions, to concern themselves not only with institutional assurance but also with civic assurance as an element of egalitarian relations among citizens.

4.1 Shaping the debate

A striking aspect of the debate around the Berlin case was how common it was for preservationists to label those calling for renaming as emotional and irrational, as acting on a sense of offence disconnected from, and not holding up to, the relevant facts. The relevant facts, in turn, were assumed to be those relating to the history of the street name. For example, one local resident who opposed the renaming suggested that ‘[a]n allegedly felt concern of members or sympathisers of small Afrocentric associations is no reason for a renaming. Local history and its reappraisal are not the privilege of a district coalition, but a matter for historians and all Berliners’ (cited in van der Heyden 2020, 143, my translation). A historian agreed that the advocates of a renaming have ‘no historically based arguments’ for their contention that the street name has racist connotations and that they are using the views of those ‘allegedly affected’ to back up their ‘ahistorical

argumentation’ (van der Heyden 2014, 249, my translation). Much of the debate centred on historical questions, such as what connotations the term M* had in the early 1700s when the street was named (Heinemann 2020; Weinlein 2021; Arndt and Hamann 2021) and whom the street was named after and with what intent (van der Heyden 2020, Kopp 2015).

Suggesting that the activists are simply being ‘emotional’ is, of course, a particularly effective way of dismissing them and their concerns.²⁰ The framing also portrayed activists as lacking crucial knowledge and understanding, as complaining without having sufficiently investigated the evidence, or bending the historical evidence to support their point of view.²¹ This was part of the mainstream response; major newspapers, including those left-of-centre, ran articles with headlines such as ‘Arguments instead of feelings, please’ (Reitzenstein 2021). All this strengthens the impression that the activists’ concerns need not be engaged with seriously, which in turn exacerbates civic uncertainty.²²

Now, we might think that if the activists have indeed got the historical facts wrong, this undermines their opposition to the street name. But historical facts were not as central to the question at hand than opponents (and, sometimes, the activists themselves) assumed. Rossi’s (2020, 51) distinction between the intended, implicit and public meanings of commemoration is

²⁰ This response is, of course, reminiscent of Fricker’s core examples of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007). Central to Fricker’s understanding of testimonial injustice is that a speaker’s testimony is given less credibility because of prejudice in the hearer’s mind against the social group of which the speaker is a member, in this case a stereotype linking speakers to being ‘overly emotional’ (though others have argued that prejudice should not be seen as required for testimonial injustice; see Li 2016). Since I cannot determine to what extent the responses discussed here were indeed driven by prejudice, I do not use the language of epistemic injustice (and my argument does not rest on these responses being shaped by prejudice).

²¹ As in the passages quoted earlier, there are also insinuations of dishonesty in the recurrent reference to ‘alleged’ concern among the activists. I am unsure what this insinuation is based on so do not want to make it central to my argument. The charge of dishonesty of course further adds to the concern here.

²² This effect is heightened by the fact that renaming and removal of statues have been common in Berlin throughout its history. A case in point is the metro station adjoining *M*straße*, which has had four different names since opening in 1908.

helpful here.²³ A monument's intended meaning is 'the thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that [its] creators intended it to convey'; the implicit meaning is 'thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that [its] creators *express* through it without necessarily intending to do so'; whereas the public meaning captures the 'thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that the public takes the representation to convey' (which may include unreasonable interpretations).

The historians' arguments focused the intended meaning of the street name: if the street, as some historians argued (e.g. van der Heyden 2020), was *meant* to honour (and therefore express a positive evaluation of) a delegation of Black politicians, then it cannot be denigrating to Black people. Indeed, the idea that concerns about names can be settled entirely by asking what those names were intended to express reoccurs throughout this debate. For example, one journalist argued that the question is effectively about intention (because, without intention, the names cannot *insult*) and – of course – a street sign cannot intend to insult (Reitzenstein 2021).

But this line of argument only settles the question if we assume that *only* intended meaning matters. That intended meaning is not sufficient to answer the question is, perhaps, easier to see in the case of denigrating names than with other kinds of AEPLS. If a term is denigrating or even a slur, then the term's origin as a neutral term does not undermine its *now* being denigrating; in fact, it is common for slurs to have started off as neutral terms (Bolinger 2020). This means that the positive intention with which someone used a certain word in the past does not mean that the word cannot now be denigrating.²⁴ Dictionaries offer assessments of the connotations of particular

²³ Rossi bases this distinction on Archer and Matheson (2019) but Rossi's slightly revised conceptualisation and application to commemoration are more helpful for my purposes.

²⁴ That German has no word for 'slur' may help explain why commentators so often default to thinking about this in terms of insults.

terms, taking into account possible variation over time or geographic contexts.^{25, 26} Importantly, these assessments are based, not on history or etymology, but on what terms mean *now* or, in Rossi's terminology, their *public* meaning.²⁷ I can't take a specific position here on how, precisely, these different meanings should be assessed for the purposes of dealing with AEPLS. But it seems plausible that while intended meaning is relevant, it does not *settle* the question of whether a name is denigrating.

In the Berlin case, many of the assumptions that led the debate to shift to historical questions, which in turn facilitated dismissing calls for renaming as 'emotional', could have been challenged by institutional actors. If civic assurance is part of what states should protect, this gives them reason to encourage explicit 'meta'-discussion about which questions (and therefore whose expertise), are relevant to the debate and in which ways. For example, the Berlin district council could have explained that while the intended meaning of the street name may be relevant, it does not undermine the claim that the word *M** is *now* denigrating since that claim that does not rest on historical questions. This could have softened the force of arguments that were used to dismiss the

²⁵ The main German dictionary labels the term *M** 'archaic and now discriminatory' (<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Mohr>, my translation). See also Arndt & Hamann (2021).

²⁶ For example, my (Canadian) dictionary software notes that '*Native Americans*, while not considered offensive or old-fashioned, is not often used in Canada. Unlike in the US, *Indian* is usually considered offensive in Canada outside of specific legal contexts' ('*Native American, First Nations or Aboriginal?*', *Language Matters*, December 2016, www.druid.com/en/reports/antidote-reference, *emphases in original*, last accessed 6 March 2024).

²⁷ My own institution made this distinction in its decision to change its sports team's name from Redmen to Redbirds: 'McGill did not adopt the Redmen name as a reference to North American Indigenous peoples. However, the name has been associated with Indigenous peoples at different points in our history. Today, "Redmen" is widely acknowledged as an offensive term for Indigenous peoples, as evidenced by major English dictionaries. While this derogatory meaning of the word does not reflect the beliefs of generations of McGill athletes who have proudly competed wearing the University's colours, we cannot ignore this contemporary understanding. Intention, however benign, does not negate prejudicial effect.' (<https://www.mcgill.ca/principal/communications/statements/decision-about-redmen-name>)

activists' concerns. Publicly engaging with these questions allows institutions to reduce the debate's negative effects on civic assurance.

4.2 Procedures

While the previous sub-section discussed how relational-egalitarian considerations become relevant in debates surrounding AEPLS, I now turn to the procedures through which decisions about AEPLS are made. One feature of tainted street names is that residents of the street in question are seen as stakeholders and therefore given central roles in the decision. (For other kind of AEPLS, such as statues, there is often a more diffuse connection to specific groups.) Residents' perspectives can be given particular weight, for example, by including them as members of the committee that makes recommendations on a possible renaming, or – as a local municipality in Berlin did in the case of a different street – by deferring to the outcome of a vote among the residents of the street in question (Dobberke 2012). Giving extra weight to local residents' views is often seen as what democracy requires and, by the same token, departures from procedures that actively include residents' views are often condemned as undemocratic.²⁸ In the Berlin case, we see this reflected in complaints that renaming M*straße was to give in to the demands of 'tiny minorities' (Adam-Tkalec 2016) or 'small Afrocentric associations' (local resident, cited in van der Heyden 2020), or that it meant that 'democratic norms are sacrificed under the pressure of a loud minority' (Adam-Tkalec 2023, all my translations). The court's explanation that decisions about street renamings must be made in the public interest and do not require input from the street's residents was widely criticised (e.g. Adam-Tkalec 2023).

²⁸ E.g. https://www.novo-argumente.com/artikel/unhistorisch_unwissenschaftlich_und_undemokratisch

What might relational egalitarians have to say about this? Relational equality is often associated with democratic procedures, such as voting, that give individuals an equal opportunity to shape decisions (e.g. Kolodny 2014). However, this is *not* what relational equality requires in the present case. Such decision-making procedures not only fail to give appropriate weight to the interests of the targeted groups (thus undermining institutional assurance), they also communicate this false understanding of the respective interests at stake, thereby risking undermining *civic* assurance.

Consider first what procedures would be suitable for making decisions about AEPLS. One way to approach this question is to ask what it means to treat people as equals when it comes to arbitrating between their different, potentially competing interests. Scheffler argues that relational equality gives rise to what he calls a ‘deliberative constraint’, which requires us to give equal weight to equally important interests:

In [a society of equals], each member accepts that every other member’s equally important interests should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made on behalf of the society as a whole. Moreover, each member has a normally effective disposition to treat the interests of others accordingly. (Scheffler 2015, 35)

Crucially, however, the interests at stake in the present context are *not* equal: for members of the targeted groups, this is an issue of equality and full membership in their community; for local residents and businesses, what’s at stake is the inconvenience and financial cost associated with changing their address. This means that decision-making procedures that give equal weight to everyone, or special weight (or even veto power) to local residents, run counter to what relational equality requires here.²⁹

²⁹ On the idea that democracy requires input procedures that reflect individuals’ stakes in the decision at hand rather than giving everyone an equal voice, see Brighouse and Fleurbaey (2010). Bengtson (2020) argues that differential voting rights are consistent with relational egalitarianism (and possibly more in line with it than giving everyone an equal vote).

Scheffler's argument is, in part, that in a society of equals, individuals would have the *disposition* to approach decision-making and conflicting interests with a willingness to give equal weight to equally important interests. If we can extend Scheffler's proposal to situations, such as the present one, where the relevant interests are of very different levels of importance, individuals should be prepared to take these relative weights into account. To be sure, local residents need not discount their interests entirely. But as far as relational equality is concerned, citizens should ask themselves which interests are at stake for different groups and what relative weight they have. Since the targeted group's interest is about recognition as an equal and therefore fundamental, it should be counted heavily in their deliberations. Instead, what often happens in cases of problematic street names is that local residents (and citizens more broadly) don't understand calls for renaming as based on equality (and therefore affecting fundamental interests) *at all*; they see them (as noted earlier) as unimportant, unnecessary, or not worth the hassle they would cause, and they dismiss and mock renaming efforts. This failure to understand what is at stake for the targeted group gives rise to the activists' impression, quoted earlier, that they are 'not supposed to belong': it undermines civic assurance. (To be sure, we can recognise the fundamental interest at stake while also disagreeing with the call for removal, for example, if we believe that removing the commemoration will make historic injustice less vivid and therefore undermine equality. The point is that the response must take seriously the claim that what's at stake for the targeted group is their status as equals.)

When institutions face decisions that affect interests with such different weights, relational equality does not require (and arguably does not even permit) deferring to a vote among local residents, or even all citizens. This is consistent with relational-egalitarian conceptions of democracy because local residents' stake in this decision is simply not the same as that of the

targeted group. For the state to adopt decision-making procedures that don't reflect the weight of the relevant interests undermines institutional assurance. What is more, adopting such procedures also communicates this false understanding to the broader public, thus heightening the risk of civic uncertainty. The choice of decision-making procedure communicates not only the *state's* weighing of different interests but also how these interests *ought* to be weighed. To protect civic assurance, institutions must choose appropriate decision-making procedures, and the justification offered in support of these procedures needs to make clear why it is not inequalitarian or undemocratic to approach AEPLS in this way.³⁰

This section argued that governments should focus not only on the immediate question of whether or not to remove specific AEPLS but also consider how possible negative responses to this removal could undermine civic assurance for the targeted groups. The idea was that, by actively engaging in the debate, clearly justifying the removal, developing the public case for it, responding to counter-arguments and adopting decision-making procedures that reflect the relative weight of the interests at stake, the egalitarian case for removal will be easier to see, thus making assurance-undermining responses less likely. Moreover, by engaging in these processes, policy-makers may even be able to change attitudes: to the extent that it may simply not be clear to many preservationists why, say, certain street names seem problematic to members of marginalised groups, their responses may become less dismissive if the relevant concerns and their links to questions about social equality, respect and status are laid out clearly. Importantly, such processes

³⁰ Of course, this doesn't mean that institutions can't recognise that local residents will have to bear costs and try to reduce them, for example by providing monetary compensation to offset the inconvenience caused (as was done in the case of a street renaming in Munich, where each resident received 100 Euros; see <https://www.tz.de/muenchen/stadt/hallo-muenchen/muenchen-entschaedigung-strassen-umbenennung-anwohner-geld-betriebe-gewerbetreibende-euro-91278835.html>). This recognises and seeks to reduce the burden on local residents without allowing their concerns to trump those of the targeted group.

can help protect civic assurance even if preservationists continue to think that the street names ought to be maintained; civic assurance does not, as I explained in section 3, require agreement on the specific decision at hand but rather that (dis)agreement be based on attitudes that are consistent with relational equality.

However, there might be cases where governments know that even with their best efforts, they will not be able to sufficiently change majority opinion on removals, making negative effects on civic assurance unavoidable. How should governments respond to such situations, in which efforts to enhance institutional assurance (via removal of AEPLS) have a substantial negative impact on civic assurance? While the right answer to this question will depend on the specifics of the case in question, a number of considerations are relevant here. First, while Waldron highlights (cf. discussion in section 3 above), that full assurance requires that we have trust in our fellow citizens as well as institutions, a reason for weighing institutional assurance more heavily than civic assurance is the power of the state: the state and its institutions can wield considerable power to treat citizens unjustly, whereas a state committed to everyone's equal status will ultimately protect citizens from discriminatory or unjust treatment by their co-citizens. Second, the link between removal of specific AEPLS and institutional assurance will vary. One concern here is the views of members of the targeted groups. How problematic do they find a particular instance of AEPLS, and what proportion of the group cares strongly about removal? The stronger and more widespread the sense among members of the targeted group that the AEPLS is disrespectful and should be removed, the more important it is for institutional assurance that the state be sensitive to these concerns, even in the face of a substantial backlash from other citizens.

Finally, how precisely a state's decision to leave a particular AEPLS in place affects overall institutional assurance will depend on how this decision fits with its other actions and the attitudes

those actions express: in a context where the state repeatedly shows its commitment to the full and equal status of all the targeted groups, failing to remove a particular instance of AEPLS may not fundamentally call this commitment (and therefore institutional assurance) into question; if, on the other hand, institutional assurance is already weakened, such a decision may be imbued with particular significance and failure to remove therefore have more substantial negative effects on institutional assurance.

5 Objections

I will briefly consider some possible objections to my argument. This will involve some bullet-biting but also help me clarify some of the implications of my argument.

5.1 *False egalitarian assurance and accurate egalitarian uncertainty*

Assurance is about individuals' sense that they are regarded as equals by co-citizens or the state. However, knowing what attitudes others have towards us is, of course, not straightforward, and we often have to rely on expressed attitudes to get a sense of what others think about us. While, for the most part, what people express is closely related to what they think, this is not a necessary connection: we can have attitudes without expressing them and express attitudes that we do not have (Lippert-Rasmussen 2018a). (This is why, when discussing the notion of relational egalitarianism at the beginning of this paper, I listed having certain attitudes and expressing these attitudes as distinct requirements.) This means that egalitarian assurance and uncertainty can be *false*: we may think that others regard us as equals when, in fact, they do not, and vice versa. To the extent that assurance is tied to *expressed* attitudes, then, we could enhance assurance by preventing the expression of inegalitarian attitudes – even if those attitudes continue to exist. But

as Langton (2016, 871) notes in response to Waldron, appearances without a corresponding reality are a ‘sham’. What is more, we might think that it is *better* for members of the targeted groups to have an accurate impression of what their co-citizens think about them (and thus face a certain amount of egalitarian uncertainty) than to have *false* assurance.³¹

I agree that this is a concern. Waldron avoids this issue because he thinks that hate speech undermines civic assurance *unduly* by giving a *false* impression of what people think: one racist graffiti can taint a community’s ‘political aesthetics’ (Waldron 2012, 75) with a ‘visible expression[] of hatred, exclusion, and contempt’ (Waldron 2012, 88) but all it takes for that graffiti to appear is one person who wants to express those views. But the ‘milder’ kinds of attitudes of indifference or dismissal that I focused on here are not views of individual ‘bad apples’; they are views held by sufficiently large numbers of people to be part of mainstream discourse.

What this objection highlights is not that subjective assurance does not matter but rather that it is not *enough*: it needs to be based on a *correct* impression of the attitudes people actually hold. This also helps clarify why it is not a helpful strategy for governments to simply suppress the expression of anti-egalitarian views. Doesn’t my account imply that if governments can successfully prevent the expression of anti-egalitarian views, that this would be an effective way of protecting civic assurance?

It is true that unexpressed views typically do not undermine assurance so there is a sense in which such suppression does indeed protect assurance. However, as I discussed earlier, if assurance rests on anti-egalitarian attitudes not being expressed rather than not being held, that assurance is false. This is not the kind of assurance governments should aim for, all things

³¹ I thank an audience member at the Central APA, February 2023, for pressing me on this point.

considered, making suppression of anti-egalitarian views a poor strategy for the protection of civic assurance. Instead, if institutions – as this paper suggests they should – make more explicit the arguments that support removal of AEPLS, this could help create more egalitarian attitudes: the removal of AEPLS can offer an important opportunity for strengthening broader egalitarian attitudes, but only if, in addition to the actual removal, state actors publicly make the case for the egalitarian reasons supporting such removals and engage with counterarguments. To the extent that the strategies I discussed achieve this goal, they strengthen not only assurance but also *accurate* assurance.

5.2 *Giving too much power to opposition*

Part of my argument is that to the extent that the case for removing AEPLS rests on a concern for assurance, we must also consider that such removals can undermine civic assurance. I focused on what states can do to protect civic assurance when removing AEPLS. But, at least in principle, my argument allows for the conclusion that the threat to civic assurance posed by the removal of a particular street name or monument is so great that it outweighs whatever gains in institutional assurance the removal would secure. Does this give too much power to preservationists, to the point where it allows them to undermine what is required of the state when it comes to AEPLS?

Rossi argues against Demetriou and Wingo's (2018) preservationist argument, which is based – similar to my argument – on a concern with the negative response to removals (though for them the concern is negative effects on civic cohesion). This is problematic, Rossi argues, because it puts such considerations 'on a moral par' with those of justice and respect (Rossi 2020, 75). My approach seems to do precisely what Rossi cautions us against: it cashes out *both* one of the reasons

for removal *and* the opposition to removal in terms of the same value – assurance – thus putting them on a moral par.

I think this is a bullet that egalitarians who see assurance as a value must bite. If civic assurance matters to relational egalitarians, they cannot ignore that opposition to the removal of AEPLS can undermine it. This means that assurance-based concerns can, under certain conditions, speak *against* removal, at least until attitudes change. What I focused on here is that how the public views and responds to removal of AEPLS is not entirely beyond institutions’ control: they must consider not just the immediate question of what to do about AEPLS but also anticipate how the broader public will respond and seek to shape this response so as to make it less damaging to civic assurance.

5.3 Assurance and the ‘merely’ symbolic

A final, broader, objection is that my focus on symbols misses much more fundamental, material injustices that affect subordinated groups. While this is often part of the dismissive preservationist response I considered here (‘don’t we have *real* problems?’), there is also a genuine concern here: municipalities seeking to remove AEPLS may have to spend significant time, energy, and resources on removal, especially in the face of opposition. Egalitarian policymakers will need to grapple with these opportunity costs and assess whether they are worth it. What is more, governments (or citizens) shouldn’t let expressive requirements become a substitute for efforts to address broader, material inequality.

At the same time, one helpful feature of the debate about AEPLS is that it facilitates a more nuanced perspective on ‘symbolic’ change and its importance. AEPLS, and how individuals interact with them, can give us clues (albeit imperfect ones) about the attitudes held by the

community. These attitudes are important in their own right but they also help bring about (or prevent) the material change that addresses injustice affecting subordinated groups. Members of the targeted group may reasonably wonder whether they can expect ‘real’ change from communities that cannot even agree to remove from public space names that denigrate them or statues of individuals who played important roles in injustices committed against their group.

6 Conclusion

The concern for egalitarian assurance should inform institutions’ response to AEPLS: everyone is to have a sense that the community views them as full and equal members. However, once we recognise that assurance comes in two forms – institutional and civic – it becomes clear that removal of AEPLS cannot only strengthen assurance but also weaken it, if there are negative or dismissive responses to the arguments supporting removal. It falls on states to anticipate and mitigate these effects. As I suggested here, this requires a broader focus that considers not only the AEPLS in question but also the debate surrounding them and the procedures we employ to decide what to do about them.

While the focus of this paper was on public language and symbols, private actors and the language or symbols they use have also been part of the debate: think, for example, of company logos that reflect racial stereotypes, names of sports teams that include denigrating names for Indigenous groups, or publishers removing slurs from children’s books. The analysis I offered in this paper can offer some guidance here, too: private actors’ decision to remove can (if perceived as sincere) heighten civic assurance, while the opposition to and mocking of such moves undermines civic assurance. While there are good (if defeasible) reasons for states not to become involved in these decisions directly, the positions politicians and other state representatives take

on these questions cannot only be a powerful source of *institutional* egalitarian assurance but can also help shape public attitudes in ways that ultimately strengthen *civic* assurance.

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