



JEAN-BAPTISTE COLBERT STATUE

Paris, France

48.862528, 2.318528



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Executive Summary

For many years, Jean-Baptiste Colbert was praised for his involvement in creating a strong French state. In recent years, however, this status has been called into question, notably concerning his involvement in laying the foundation of the *Code Noir*, a legal text which legitimised slavery in the French colonies. In the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd, Colbert's statue was painted red and had 'Negrophobie d'état' (State Anti-Blackness) graffitied on it. But his figure had already been contested some years before, in 2017, in the media. This case study illustrates the public and political debate that emerged in France after the vandalism of Colbert's statue and, more broadly, concerning the debate around its removal or relocation.

Introduction

On the 23rd of June 2020, during the wave of Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder, the statue of Jean-Baptiste Colbert outside Paris' National Assembly on the Quai d'Orsay was vandalised. The red paint and graffitied slogan, '*Négrophobie d'Etat*,¹ written on the pedestal refer to Colbert's role in the elaboration of the Code Noir, a legal text issued in 1685, which institutionalised ownership and domination over enslaved people in the French colonies.²

Colbert stands alongside other controversial figures in France's colonial past and current public debate in both metropolitan France and its Overseas territories. Amongst them, Louis Faidherbe (the colonial administrator of Senegal), Joseph Gallieni (the infamous military commander in Madagascar), Victor Schoelcher (the politician who worked towards the abolition of slavery in 1848), Jules Ferry (credited with the foundation of free and compulsory education but also intrinsically colonialist), and Voltaire.

This political act also cuts deep into France's societal and political context of police violence against ethnic minorities. Moreover, it puts the 2016 case of Adama Traoré – a Black man who died while in police custody – in the spotlight again as the trial is ongoing as of June 2022.³

Background

Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the Statesman

Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683) was an influential statesman who served under Louis XIV during what is referred to as the 'Grand Siècle' during the 17th century.⁴ A key figure of this century, Colbert is sometimes also referred to as the 'Grand Colbert.' Although he was hated in his time by some nobles, in recent times, he has begun to be perceived instead as the father of the modern state and praised for his effort in improving public administration and commerce thanks to long-lasting reforms. Austere and a workaholic, he was, among other positions he held, Controller-General of Finances from 1665 to 1683 and Secretary of State to the French Navy.⁵

Colbert's mind was focused on one sole task: making France a powerful and prestigious nation. In a context of international competition for national influence and wealth – mainly against Holland and the United Kingdom – Colbert championed mercantilist ideals. He contributed to making France the most powerful country in Europe.⁶ He reformed the mediaeval and chaotic taxation system and reorganised commerce and industry. He implemented laws to improve and control the quality of goods and founded state manufacturers.⁷ In order to extend France's

¹ France24, "French parliament statue of 'Black Code' author defaced in anti-racism protest" *France24*, June 24, 2020.

² *Le code noir ou Édit du Roy*, site of the Assemblée nationale, March, 1685.

³ Facebook. 'La vérité pour Adama.' (n.a.). *Marche Festival Adama*. May 25, 2022.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, (n.a.) "Jean-Baptiste Colbert."

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Nowell, C. E., "Mercantilism", *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Jean-Baptiste Colbert."

international share trade, he founded trading companies, including, notably, the infamous French East India and West India companies (founded in 1664).⁸ Moreover, he brought order to the kingdom's finances and administrative procedures, improved legislation for criminal law, developed road and water networks across France, and codified the administration of forests.

As secretary of state for the navy, he was in charge of making France a maritime power. He achieved this by building and equipping the king's ships, fortifying ports, and consolidating a merchant fleet to expand France's trade. Significantly, he founded the port of Rochefort, enhanced fortifications, and founded several naval schools.⁹

Colbert was also a significant figure in the cultural life of the country. A member of the prestigious Académie Française, he created schools such as the *Ecole des Jeunes de Langues* and Academies such as the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1663), the *Académie des Sciences* (1666) and the *Académie Royale d'Architecture* (1671).¹⁰

Colbert is thus celebrated because he made France a strong, modern, and better-equipped monarchy and state. Countless colleges, schools, streets and statues are spread across France, paying tribute to his services to the state.

In his relentless quest for French hegemony and development of maritime international trade, however, Colbert did not hesitate to resort to exploiting colonies, and he is now recognised as having laid the foundations of the Code Noir (the Black Code), which regulated and institutionalised slavery.

The 'Code Noir'

The '*édit de mars 1685 sur la police des îles de l'Amérique française*' (edict of March 1685 regulating the Islands of French America, which was written by his son (Jean-Baptiste), then secretary of state, two years after Colbert's death in 1683), also known as the 'Code Noir,' is a set of laws which codified the relations between enslaved people and slave owners in the colonies. The first articles of the Code deal with religion (the first commands that '*tous les Juifs*'¹¹ should be '*chass[és]*' from the region), and those immediately following it state that enslaved people should all be baptised and educated in the Catholic religion.¹² They define how weddings between enslaved people should be conducted and prohibit gatherings of enslaved people, '*à peine de punition corporelle*' (subject to corporal punishment, art. XVI).¹³ Enslaved people could not sell goods at the market without the consent of their masters. Slave owners have to provide some food to the enslaved people and some articles of clothing, and '*les esclaves qui ne seront point nourris, vêtus et entretenus par leurs Maîtres (...) pourront en donner avis à nôtre Procureur (...) les Maîtres seront poursuivis (...), pour les crieries et traitements barbares et inhumains des*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'All Jewish people' should be 'driven out' of the region.

¹² Translation by the author. Le code noir ou Édit du Roy, site of the Assemblée nationale, March, 1685.

¹³ Ibid.

Maîtres envers leurs esclaves ('slaves that are not be fed (...) can notify our Prosecutor (...) Masters will be tried (...) for the Masters' verbal abuse and inhumane treatments towards their slaves,' art. XXVI).¹⁴

Enslaved people have no right to personal belongings: '*Déclarons que les esclaves ne pouvoir [sic] rien avoir qui ne soit à leur Maître*' ('We declare that slaves own nothing that does not belong to their Master,' art. XXXI), nor do they have judicial rights: '*Ne pourrons aussi les esclaves être parties, ni en jugement ni en Matière Civile, (...), ni être partie Civile en Matière Criminelle, sauf à leurs maîtres d'agir et de poursuivre en Matière Criminelle la réparation des outrages et excès qui auront été commis contre leurs esclaves*' ('Slaves cannot be a party, neither in judgment nor in Civil matters, (...) nor be a Civil party in Criminal matters, and to pursue in Criminal matter except for their masters to pursue the reparation of affronts and offenses that will have been perpetrated against slaves,' art. XXXI).¹⁵

It is clearly outlined that any enslaved person who raises a hand against his master or his master's family shall be punished by death (art. XXXIII). Theft can be punishable by corporal punishment or even death. Article XXXVIII provides that a runaway enslaved person is to have his ears cut and have a lily flower tattooed on his shoulder. Should they run away again, they must have their leg cut and receive a second tattoo on the other shoulder. The third attempt to escape is to be punished by death. The objectification of enslaved persons is made clear; they are, in effect, regarded as property. The Code ends with the conditions for the enfranchisement of enslaved people.

The Statue

In order to better contextualise the discussion, it is worth discussing its historical and architectural setting. The statue is part of a collection of four statues and sits on the facade of the national assembly. The statues were set during the Napoleonic era in 1806 in order to demonstrate a continuity between the Napoleonic empire and the former Monarchy:

- Sully (minister of Henri IV) was a reformer,
- L'Hospital (Catherine de Medicis), a conciliator during the religious wars,
- Colbert, a reformer of the French economy
- d'Aguesseau, a great lawyer who promoted law unification (18th century)

The fact that the statue of Colbert is part of this larger group complicates the discussion of removal, or any changes that one could argue should be made. No longer is it a matter of weighing the values that are represented by the individual and its representation; because altering this statue also affects the representation of the other 3 and the art piece as a whole. It is worth posing the question of whether (and then how) these factors can even be weighed off. At the same time, it is clear that the vicinity to other statues or a representation being part of a whole is on its own not a sufficient reason to keep a statue if there is substantial resistance

¹⁴ Translation by the author. Le code noir ou Édit du Roy, site of the Assemblée nationale, March, 1685.

¹⁵ Ibid.

against it.

History of the Contestation

Before Black Lives Matter

The debate over Jean-Baptiste Colbert and his controversial legacy first emerged in the media in late August 2017 via an opinion piece in the left-wing newspaper *Libération* written by Louis-Georges Tin, director of the CRAN (Conseil représentatif des associations noires). In this piece, entitled ‘*Vos héros sont parfois nos bourreaux,*’ Tin draws a parallel between the appraisal of colonialist figures in public space and systemic racism: ‘*N’y a-t-il pas un lien entre le piédestal où l’on met les esclavagistes et le mépris social que subissent les descendants d’esclaves?*’¹⁶ (Your heroes are our executioners [...] Is there not a link between the pedestal on which supporters of slavery are put and the social contempt from which the descendants of slavery suffer?)

The same arguments made their way into a piece in the newspaper *Le Monde* in September 2017.¹⁷ After the events in Charlottesville, when white supremacists demonstrated against the removal of the statue of separatist Robert E. Lee, Tin called attention to the fact that ‘*la question des emblèmes esclavagistes dans l’espace public se pose également dans notre pays. Elle est formulée depuis au moins trente ans par des citoyens – qu’ils viennent de l’outre-mer ou non – qui demandent que ces symboles soient retirés* (the question of pro-slavery emblems in public space is also at stake in our country. It has been voiced for at least thirty years by citizens who ask for these symbols to be removed (whether they be from Overseas territories or not). The article thus called for self-examination on behalf of the French state and addressed the inconsistency between the awareness of racism abroad and its invisibility within French society. The tribune stated that the CRAN opted for a realistic position as they understood the anxiety of the French people and thus concluded that only one prominent figure of slavery should be toppled: Colbert. Indeed, ‘*on ne pourra sans doute pas modifier tous les symboles liés à l’esclavage dans l’espace public; tant ils sont nombreux et intimement liés à notre histoire nationale. Mais on ne peut pas non plus ne rien faire, en restant dans le déni et dans le mépris, comme si le problème n’existait pas*’¹⁸ (‘We certainly aren’t able to adapt every symbol in public space connected to slavery, given how many there are and how they figure in our national history. But we cannot do anything and remain in denial and contempt, as though the problem did not exist’).

The CRAN demanded that schools named after Colbert be renamed. From the CRAN’s point of view, the argument according to which Colbert developed the French economy and made it a wealthy nation does not stand because this ‘improvement’ was made possible only through slave labour. As Louis-Georges Tin pointed out, buildings are not intended to keep records of the

¹⁶ Louis-Georges Tin, “Vos héros sont parfois nos bourreaux.” *Libération*, August 28, 2017.

¹⁷ Louis-George Tin and Louis Sala-Molins. “Mémoire de l’esclavage : « Débaptisons les collèges et les lycées Colbert ! »” *Le Monde*, September 17, 2017.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

deeds of criminals but to honour heroes. For him, it is the function of history to record who Colbert was, not the buildings. As for those who want the statue removed, their demands are legitimised by the fact that Colbert's legacy is still very much alive in French society through racism, discrimination, and neo-colonialism.

Tin's opinion received immediate coverage in the media in September 2017, as Louis-Georges Tin was invited by several TV studios to voice his opinion, including, notably, an interview on the programme *On va plus loin*, in which he makes the argument that schools named after Colbert should be renamed. He illustrates his point by referring to the Lycee Colbert de Paris's website: in its section on Colbert, Tin argues that there is no mention of Colbert's link to slavery. Thus, he concludes, 'on enseigne l'histoire en prétendant transmettre une information sur l'histoire, et on cache l'histoire' (we teach history under the pretence of disseminating historical knowledge, but in reality we are hiding history).¹⁹ Tin does not mention, however, that French history textbooks do cover the history of slavery and colonialism, as well as Colbert's role. However, media coverage of the debate soon died out, and other social issues took centre stage.

After Black Lives Matter

The debate resurfaced again in the media's agenda in the press and on TV in the wake of BLM movements and discussions over racism in France. An activist belonging to the *Brigade Anti-Nérophobie* was filmed spraying the message 'Nérophobie d'Etat' on the pedestal of Colbert's statue outside the National Assembly, implying systemic racism in France. When the police told him this was forbidden, he replied that²⁰ 'What is forbidden is racism. This man glorifies negrophobia.'

Another group that has been very vocal in this controversy is the *Ligue de Défense Noire-Africaine* (LDNA), a Pan-African organisation defending the rights of African descendants and Africans, whose purpose is to decolonise thought and minds and denounce systematic racism directed specifically at black minorities. During a gathering against racism at the Place de la Concorde near the US embassy on the 6th of June, Egountchi Behanzin, leader of the LDNA, held a diatribe on the microphone against the French state, which is 'a totalitarian, terrorist, pro-slavery, colonialist state.'²¹

The Adama Traoré committee may be the most active and influential in the media. Adama Traoré was a 24-year-old man who, according to the committee led by his sister Assa Traoré, died in a police station after being suffocated by three policemen. A case symptomatic of violence against the Black community, an inquest began in 2016 to determine the truth of the events and is still ongoing. On 13th of June, Adama Traoré's committee called for a demonstration to protest

¹⁹ Public Sénat, "Colbert : Polémiques sur une statue - On Va Plus Loin." YouTube video, 10:09. September 20, 2017.

See also the debate between Robert Ménard and Rokhaya Diallo on the same subject of changing the name of Colbert schools: Europe 1, "Débaptiser les écoles Colbert ? Le débat Robert Ménard-Rokhaya Diallo." YouTube video, 9:27. September 21, 2017.

²⁰ Author's translation. France 24. "'Un tag "Nérophobie d'Etat" recouvre la statue de Colbert devant l'Assemblée nationale.'" June 24, 2020.

²¹ Ligue de défense noire Africaine, "LDNA « L'ÉTAT FRANÇAIS EST UN ÉTAT TOTALITAIRE, TERRORISTE, ESCLAVAGISTE COLONIALISTE »." YouTube video, 5:27. June 10, 2020.

against racism. The demonstration faced resistance from the police and the far-right movement *Génération identitaire*, the members of the latter waving a counter-banner which read '*Justice pour les victimes du racisme antiblanc*'²² ('Justice for victims of anti-white racism').

The case for taking down the statue of Colbert emerged in Black communities and minority groups but is also defended by writers, philosophers, sociologists, historians and a number of politicians. It has been noted, for instance, by journalist Léonora Miano, that Macron's statement on June 14, '*La République ne déboulonnera pas de statues*' ('The Republic will not topple any of its statues') lacks historical perspective: the Republic was first built on the ruins of royal statues in 1792 after monarchs' tombs had been vandalised in 1793.²³ In the same article, published in June 2020 in *Le Monde*²⁴ Miano, notes that descendants of slaves have become French through violence and that slaves were forced to contribute to the nation's wealth. Taking down Colbert's statue is thus a symbolic and just retribution for them. The role of education is always stressed: the statue can be put in a museum, where it could serve an educative function instead of glorifying slavery when displayed in public space. Politicians' refusal to have a constructive debate on systemic racism is often clearly demonstrated. It should be noted that the *Défenseur des droits* has already admonished the Paris police for being systematically racist,²⁵ and that, according to a 2017 study, young men perceived as black or Arab are twenty times more likely to be subject to police checks.²⁶

A counterargument to those who believe taking down statues amounts to an erasure of history is the distinction between history as fact and commemoration. Learning and remembering history in schoolbooks differs from making excuses for cruel '*Grands Hommes*' in the public sphere. Françoise Vergès, a historian specialising in colonialism and feminism, says that '*la statuaire en France n'a jamais été figée*'²⁷ ('the tradition of statues in France has never been rigid') and that keeping Colbert is an insult to descendants of immigrants. She advocates competing memories in public space.²⁸ Overall, those favouring Colbert's removal ask for a more inclusive, diverse public space where minority narratives can play a part. Michel Wieworka, a sociologist and President of the CRAN's Scientific Council, insists '*il faut ouvrir des débats*' ('debates must be opened') and that the controversy over Colbert should make us question our relationship to the Republic, to the state and the nation. He makes a strong case that statues are not about history but instead express gratitude,²⁹ and that we should hold a collective debate on what the French are grateful for as a nation.

Colbert's defenders include mostly some right-wing historians and politicians. This political division can be seen in a HuffPost video (discussed below) in which *députés* (MPs) from political

²² Romain Herreros, "Génération Identitaire déploie une banderole à la Marche pour Adama Traoré" *Le HuffPost*. 13 June 2020.

²³ Léonora Miano, "Ce qui dérange, c'est le profil de ceux qui demandent le déplacement des statues de Colbert." *Le Monde*, June 24, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Franceinfo, "Le Défenseur des droits dénonce un cas de "discrimination systémique" par la police à Paris." June 3, 2020.

²⁶ Brut, "Trois lycéens attaquent l'État pour discrimination et contrôle au faciès." YouTube video, 2:39. November 5, 2018.

²⁷ France24, "Statues déboulonnées : "en France, l'histoire coloniale n'a pas encore été pensée"". YouTube. Retrieved June 20, 2022.

²⁸ France24, "Un tag "Nérophobie d'État" recouvre la statue de Colbert devant l'Assemblée nationale." June 24, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.

parties on different ends of the political spectrum express their opinions on renaming the *Salle Colbert* (Colbert Room) in the *Assemblée Nationale*.³⁰ More broadly, those who defend naming establishments after Colbert, and keeping statues of him, assert that we should not be judging a historical character by today's set of values and use the fact that colonialism and racism were accepted and normalised in the 17th century as a mitigating circumstance. Some such commentators indeed use *reductio ad absurdum*³¹ to say that seeing as nobody is without flaws – that all great men have a 'dark side' – it is wrong to shift the historiographical status quo. They argue, for instance, that 'great men' such as the founding fathers of the 3rd Republic were colonialists; that Jefferson and Washington owned slaves, and that slavery was widespread across the East and West alike.³²

A further argument instrumentalised in Colbert's defence is that he did not physically sign the definitive version of the Code Noir – he died two years before it was officially issued. This task thus fell to his son and successor, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the Marquis de Seignelay, who succeeded in his father's office. Additionally, the Code Noir was meant, according to Colbert's defenders, to regulate and soften the treatment of slaves, and that having a Code is better than nothing. This is the view espoused by Éric Zémour, former-TV personality turned presidential candidate and leader of the far-right party Reconquête,³³ who argues that the Code imposed certain limitations and that the slave owners saw it as an infringement on their liberties. Zémour goes as far as to say that since slaves are baptised in the Catholic religion, they are considered human.³⁴

Other voices campaign for a solution of compromise and say that while the statue should be kept, additional context and historical explanations should accompany it.

Decision-making process

In his address on the 14th of June, just after the BLM demonstrations, President Macron acknowledged the necessity to fight racism, particularly in the field of education and in the job market. But as he implicitly mentioned the demonstration on the 13th of June organised by the Adama Traoré committee, he called demonstrators '*séparatistes*'³⁵ who instrumentalise this '*noble combat*' ('noble fight') against racism and made it degenerate into '*communautarisme*.' This stemmed from Macron's fears that '*Je nous vois nous diviser pour tout et parfois perdre le sens même de notre histoire*' ('I see us being divided on everything and sometimes lose the very meaning of our history'). 'The Republic will not erase any trace or name of its history. It will not forget any of its great works or tear down any of its statues,' said Macron before providing his unconditional support to the police forces. This statement was criticised as a denial of the necessity for debate.

³⁰ Pierre Tremblay, "Que Faire de Colbert? Quand les députés s'interrogent sur Notre Histoire." Le HuffPost. February 6, 2021.

³¹ argument to absurdity

³² *ibid.*

³³ It should be noted that that local slave-owners often refused to implement the 1685 ordinance as they saw it as an limitation on their "property"-rights.

³⁴ Heuréka, "Zémour Jean Baptiste Colbert l'initiateur du code noir." YouTube video, 7:18. June 23, 2020.

³⁵ [19] BFMTV, "L'intégralité de l'allocution d'Emmanuel Macron du 14 juin 2020." YouTube video, 14:52. June 14, 2020.

Former Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and president of the *Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage* (Foundation for the Memory of Slavery) asks that the Colbert room at the National Assembly and at the Ministry of Economy be changed names.³⁶ On TV5Monde, he assured that *'je n'ai pas cherché à provoquer, j'ai cherché à provoquer le débat'*³⁷ ('I did not mean to start a fight, but to start a debate'), arguing that attention should be paid to the claims of the youth. In response to this, the current Minister of Economy and Finance, Bruno Le Maire, categorically refused to change names and said that history should be seen as a strength for the future: *'il ne faut pas systématiquement dénigrer notre histoire et l'accabler'* ('one should not systematically denigrate and suppress out the history').³⁸

In the midst of BLM protests, two schools in Thionville (Moselle), the Lycée Colbert and Lycée Germain, merged together and had to find a new name. Pupils themselves were surveyed to decide. The name Colbert was abandoned, and the new Lycée was named 'Rosa Park,' after the Afro-American activist who refused to give up her place to a white man on a bus in December 1955. The Conseil Régional of Alsace (Grand Est) approved this resolution which immediately sparked controversy from the right and far-right. Rassemblement National MEP Jean-Lin Lacapelle and Les Républicains MP Constance Le Grip accused the Conseil of erasing and rewriting history.³⁹ Nevertheless, in a press release issued on the 19th of June, the Conseil explained that the decision to modify the Lycée's name was made before George Floyd's death.⁴⁰

In the meantime, MP for Martinique Serge Letchimy took the chance to raise race issues and the Colbert statue in a question to the Government during a Parliamentary session. Letchimy insisted that the Government take action to back up the promises of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Men and of Citizen, that *'par la présence inacceptable de certains monuments symboles de la période coloniale, ici à l'Assemblée nationale – je pense à la statue de Colbert, le père du Code Noir – ou par la parole de celui qui, à longueur de tribunes et d'antennes, distille impunément la peste qui lui sert d'activité mentale : Éric Zemmour'*⁴¹ (through the unacceptable presence of certain monuments symbolising the colonial period, here in the National Assembly - I am thinking of the statue of Colbert, the father of the Code Noir - or by the words of the man who, with impunity, distils the plague that serves as his mental activity, Éric Zemmour). To this, the Minister for the Interior responded that *'ce n'est pas en déboulonnant les statues mais en construisant une société apaisée que nous nous en sortirons'*⁴² (it's not by toppling statues, but by building a peaceful society, that we can move forward).

A recent report by the Huffington Post demonstrated a clear diversity of opinion on the question of what should be done with statues. While some noted that *'les révolutionnaires aussi ont fait*

³⁶ TV5MONDE Info "Jean-Marc Ayrault : "Je n'ai pas cherché à provoquer"." YouTube video, 1:39. Posted June 20, 2020.

³⁷ Arnaud Wajdzik, "Jean-Marc Ayrault : « Je ne demande pas qu'on démonte toutes les statues de Colbert ! »" *Ouest France*, June 15, 2020.

³⁸ FranceInfo, "Colbert est une des figures historiques importantes" de la France, selon Bruno Le Maire, qui refuse de débaptiser les bâtiments portant son nom." *Franceinfo*, June 15, 2020.

³⁹ LCI, "Pourquoi le changement de nom d'un lycée Colbert en Moselle fait polémique." *LCI*, June 23, 2020.

⁴⁰ Information on the Lycée Polyvalent de Thionville's new name, site of the Conseil régional d'Alsace.

⁴¹ Letchimy, S. (2020, June 17). Question N°3093 - assemblée nationale. Retrieved June 20, 2022,

⁴² Brigitte Brault, "Le député Serge Letchimy demande au gouvernement de mettre fin au "racisme obscur et larvé de la société française"" *Martinique la 1ere*, June 16, 2020.

le choix, durant la Révolution française, d'enlever les symboles de la monarchie et de fabriquer d'autres symboles...c'est républicain de s'interroger sur notre propre histoire (the revolutionaries too chose, during the Revolution, to take down symbols of the monarchy and create different symbols...it's republican to question ourselves about our own history), others remained unenthusiastic, noting *'franchement, c'est tellement éloigné de ce que les gens attendent...je ne fais pas partie des gens qui veulent détruire l'histoire ou qui veulent la réécrire'* (frankly, it's so far off what people expect from us [MPs]...I'm not one of those people who want to destroy or rewrite history).⁴³ Despite this lack of consensus, a recent proposal by the governing LREM party could create a museum of colonialism, serving as an instrument of education, opening these themes up to discussion rather than uncritically valorising them.⁴⁴

Summary and Conclusions

Finally, it appears that the debate over Colbert's statue points to an even more fundamental question: should there be any debate? For some, removing statues is out of the question, and there is no discussion to be had. This is the current government's view but is also supported by far-right politicians, such as Marine Le Pen or Éric Zémour (though their reasons for coming to this position likely differ). For others, the Colbert case provides an opportunity to discuss broader structural issues such as police violence and systemic racism. At the same time, it raises questions of where representations should be to facilitate these discussions; are museums better due to their context, or should we maximise public exposure to these statues?

The government should make a gesture of reconciliation towards minorities. While some steps have been made,⁴⁵ it is worth noting that there is still a sense in some communities that it is insufficient. We should critically engage with the question of whether more or different things should be done.

The debate – or lack thereof – about Colbert is a symptom of the French Republic's current treatment of minority groups and its constant fear of *'communautarisme.'* The model of the universal French Republic is facing a crisis, forcing the Republic to redefine itself and be more inclusive and aware of its ethnic minorities. Pluralising history is not erasing it, and *'réviser'* (denying) differs from *'revisiter'* (rediscovering) history.

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⁴³ Pierre Tremblay, "Que faire de Colbert? Quand les députés s'interrogent sur notre histoire" *Huffington Post*, February 6, 2021.

⁴⁴ Paul Chauet, "Lutte contre le racisme : un rapport parlementaire propose un musée de la colonisation" *L'Express*, March 9, 2021.

⁴⁵ eg: setting of Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage (Foundation for the memory of slavery) sponsored by the state or the loi Taubira (2001) which recognized slavery as a crime against humanity.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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