



COLUMBUS MONUMENT

Barcelona, Spain
41.375804, 2.1734113

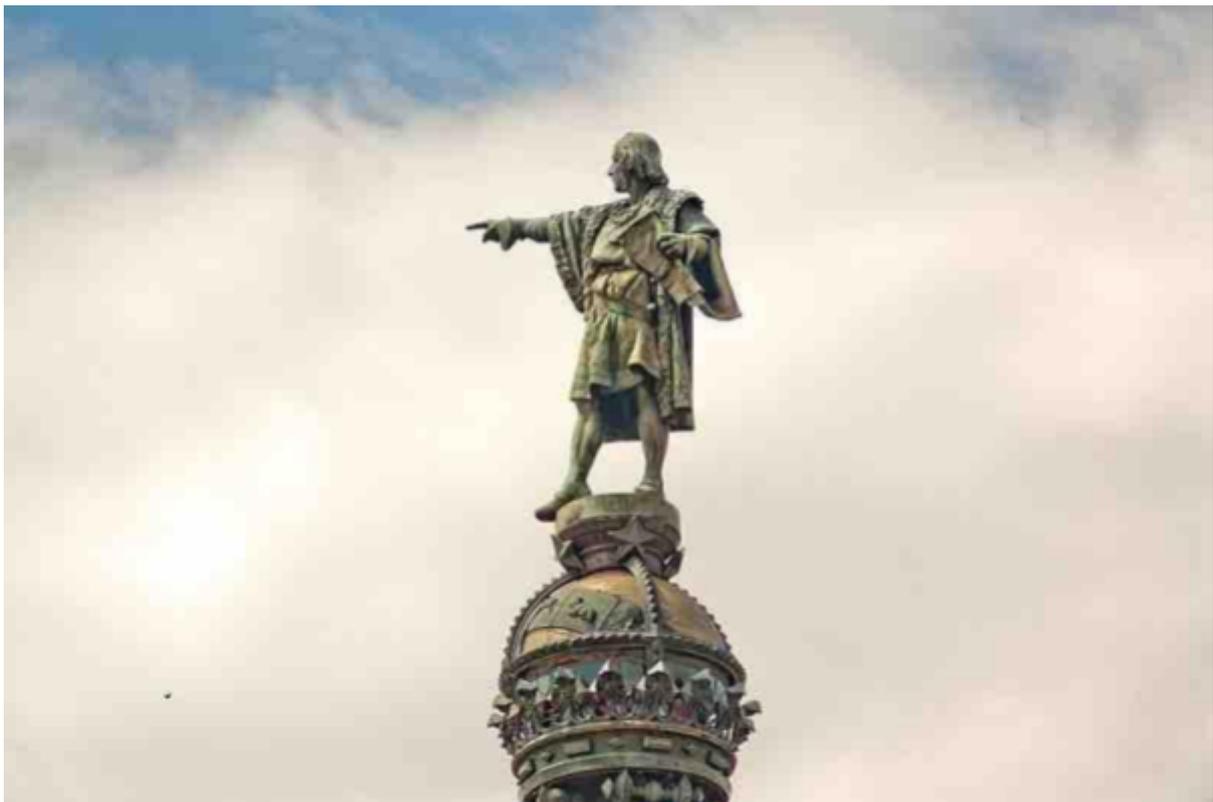


Image by Juanedc via Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

Executive Summary

The Columbus Monument in Barcelona, located at the intersection of the city's port and the main street of *Las Ramblas*, was built during the Columbus-mania of the 19th century and was the largest monument dedicated to the so-called discoverer of the Americas. In the last years, several social and political groups have called for its removal, especially since 2020 inspired by the Black Lives Movement. However, the city council has decided to maintain the statue and re-contextualise it and the city's colonial past.

Introduction

The monument to Christopher Columbus in Barcelona was erected at the end of *Las Ramblas*¹ in 1888,² amid a ‘Columbus-mania’³ when dozens of statues were erected to commemorate the so-called ‘discoverer’ of America. Located in the *Portal de la Pau* (Peace Portal), the monument is part of the identity mark of the port area of the city, serving as a link between the *Ramblas*, the busiest streets in the city, and the *Passeig de Colom* (Columbus Walk).⁴ Inside its 57m column, there is a lift that takes visitors to a viewpoint with a privileged scenario of the city.

Nowadays, his figure and heritage are largely contested and many of those statues on his name have been taken down. In Barcelona, the independent-leftist part *Candidatura d’Unitat Popular* (Popular Unity Candidacy - CUP) started a petition in 2016,⁵ even though it did not have any other political supporters, it started a social contestation over the sculpture. Following the Black Lives Matter movement and protests, many anti-racist groups⁶ have started to call for the statues removal. However, the call to remove the statue has been rejected by the city’s mayor, Ada Colau, claiming that it’s better for the city to face its past than to deny it. Instead, in June 2020, she expressed her intention to contextualise the monument. However, as of 2021, no contextualisation process has started. The lack of clear action is not surprising given the sensitivity of the debate and the rising tensions between supporters and opponents of the monument and the figure of Columbus in Spain.

Background

Columbus as a symbol of modernity and the 1888 Barcelona Universal Exposition

After 1860, a growing interest in Christopher Columbus’ life and a dispute over its origins (whether if he was Spanish or Italian) provoked a wave of statues dedicated to him both in Europe and the Americas. Installed in 1888, the Barcelona statue was the 58th one in the world commemorating Columbus and the biggest one erected at the time. In the next four years, eight more monuments were installed throughout Spain dedicated to Columbus.⁷ This wave of Columbus-mania peaked in 1892 with the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the arrival of Columbus to America. That year, Queen Regent Maria Cristina decided to establish this date, October 12, as the national day of Spain by royal decree,⁸ which has remained Spanish national day, being recognised by the democratic governments of the beginning of the 20th century – who renamed it *Fiesta de la Raza* (Race Festivity) – and later by General

¹ The *Ramblas* is a large boulevard which runs through the heart of Barcelona. It is around 1km long and runs from the city centre, *Plaça Catalunya* (Catalonia Square), to the city’s port.

² Stéphane Michonneau, “Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?” Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carlos Zapatero, “¿Hacia dónde señala el dedo de Colón?,” *Metropoli*, October 7, 2019.

⁵ Minutes of the Barcelona City Council meeting of 30 September 2016, pp. 69-70.

⁶ Sam Jones, “Call to topple Christopher Columbus statue from its Barcelona perch,” *Guardian*, September 26, 2016.

⁷ Stéphane Michonneau, “Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?” Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

⁸ Gaceta de Madrid. 1892. Madrid: 269.

and dictator Francisco Franco⁹ and later by the successive democratic governments.¹⁰

In 19th-century Barcelona, the rising popularity of Columbus' figure was closely linked to the rising dominance of the Catalan bourgeoisie, the protagonists of the industrial revolution and precursors of Catalonia's industrialisation. Together with the fact that Columbus chose the port of Barcelona to disembark on his return from America,¹¹ it influenced the creation of a romanticising myth around his figure and heritage. They believed that Columbus embodied the values of the bourgeoisie as he was considered to have brought modernity and to represent an embodiment of individual freedom. Causing him to become one of the first Spanish national heroes.¹²



Figure 1: 'Close up of the sculptural ensemble'. Image by Seudonimoanonimo via Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

As a consequence of this Catalan Columbus-mania, in 1881, Antoni Fages i Ferrer, a member of the high society of Barcelona who had a special interest in the Spanish empire and the conquest of America, proposed to the city council the idea of building a monument in homage to Columbus and his discovery. That same year, his proposal was approved and the council started to build the statue.¹³ The monument was built as part of the renovation of Barcelona's

⁹ *Decreto de 10 de enero de 1958 por el que se declara el 12 de octubre fiesta nacional, bajo el nombre de 'Día de la Hispanidad'*, February 8, 1958.

¹⁰ 18/1987 Act, October 7, 1987.

¹¹ Ignacio Padilla, "El dedo de Colón," *El Periodico*, July 12, 2016.

¹² Stéphane Michonneau, "Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?," Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

¹³ *Ibid.*

coastline in preparation for the Universal Exhibition of 1888. It was intended to become a symbol of the modernity of Barcelona in the context of the 1888 Barcelona Universal Exposition,¹⁴ symbolising the predominance of the bourgeoisie and their businesses as the way to human progression.¹⁵ The consistory chose two projects: 'People Become Great by Making Great Works' by Mauricio Auger i Robert, and 'Honouring Columbus, Catalonia Honours its Favourite Son' by the architect Gaietà Buïgas i Monravà. The jury decided to go with Buïgas i Monravà's design.¹⁶ To fund its construction, the City Council made an appeal to municipalities and private financiers of the time. It is unclear who ultimately funded the project and to what extent, however, it is well documented that Antonio López y López, Marquis of Comillas, contributed 20,000 pesetas (120€ today).¹⁷ However, the private donations were not enough to fully fund the monument's erection and the City Council ended up covering all expenses.¹⁸

The monument was inaugurated on June 1, 1888, in a ceremony presided over by Queen Regent Maria Cristina, in the presence of the President of the Council of Ministers Práxedes Mateo Sagasta, and with the King of Italy, the President of the United States Grover Cleveland and a representation of the city of Genoa attending as guests.¹⁹ The monumental complex includes different sculptural works, such as the sculpture 'reception of the



Figure 2: "One of the lions guarding Columbus Monument." Image by Catalan Art & Architecture Gallery (Josep Bracons) via Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

immortal Genoese in the city of Barcelona' by Josep Llimona or the sculpture 'Columbus and his son begging for alms at the door of the convent of *Santa María de la Rábida*.²⁰ The sculptural ensemble offers the visitors the opportunity to re-explore Columbus' adventure, from his departure from Spain to the discovery,²¹ guarded by eight lions.²² From an iconographic point of view, it is interesting to highlight the prominence given to figures who represent Catalan investment in Columbus' travels, while figures such as the Catholic Monarchs are represented in bronze medallions.²³ The bronze Columbus by sculptor Rafael

¹⁴ The Universal Expositions are large international exhibitions dedicated to showcase the achievements of the country where it is organised. They vary in character and are held in different parts of the world, lastin from three to six months. The 1888 Exposition in Barcelona was Spain's first world fair; it took place between April 8 and December 9. For more information: https://dbpedia.org/page/1888_Barcelona_UniversaL_Exposition.

¹⁵ Jaume Fabre, Josep M. Huertas and Judit Subirachs i Burgaya, "Monument a Cristòfor Colom," Barcelona City Council, accessed March 18, 2021.

¹⁶ Sílvia Marimon, "Desmuntant Colom: Què hi ha rere la icona?" *ARA*, October 2, 2016.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ José Ángel Montañés, "¿Cuántos años tiene la estatua de Colón y dónde señala su dedo?" *El País*, September 28, 2016.

¹⁹ Jaume Fabre, Josep M. Huertas and Judit Subirachs i Burgaya, "Monument a Cristòfor Colom," Barcelona City Council, accessed March 18, 2021.

²⁰ EFE, "Manifestación antirracista en Barcelona y a favor de retirar la estatua de Colón," *El Diario*, June 14, 2020.

²¹ Stéphane Michonneau, "Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?" Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016

²² Carlos Zapatero, "¿Hacia dónde señala el dedo de Colón?" *Metropoli*, October 7, 2019.

²³ Sílvia Marimon, "Desmuntant Colom: Què hi ha rere la icona?" *ARA*, October 2, 2016.

Atchè, depicts his right arm pointing towards the horizon (it is unclear to what he is pointing at, as geographically America is in the opposite direction) while his left hand holds a navigation chart. Columbus is further wearing a fur-collared coat with tights and long hair, representative of the fashion of the time.²⁴

Years later, in 1892, the Columbus Monument became the centre of the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the arrival of Columbus to America, an event that was recorded on a tombstone and later placed at the monument. However, after 1892, Catalonia began to disregard the monument as it saw the beginning of a profound cultural revolution. For the new Catalan generation, already immersed in an independence movement, this monument did not fit with the revised vision of Catalonia's past and incipient independent movement, which considered it to be a separate nation from the Spanish and which gave predominance to the typical and traditional Catalan values and culture. At the same time, the significance of the figure of Columbus changed and became linked to religious imperialism and the exaltation of the Monarchy. As a consequence, the monument and figure of Columbus were hardly ever again used as a key site and centre of new commemorations in Barcelona.²⁵

History of the Contestation

The figure and statues of Columbus continued to be uncontested and celebrated during the 20th century.²⁶ During the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco – from 1939 to 1975 – the propaganda apparatus used the legacy of Columbus to legitimise the regime. The regime drew parallels between Columbus' voyage of 1492, which led to the conquest and colonisation of America, and the military uprising of 1936, which ended in a civil war and Franco's victory in 1939. However, the celebration of Columbus had been going on for a long time, as conservative intellectuals celebrated his legacy since the 1920s. One of them, Zacarías de Vizcarra, a Basque priest, proposed in 1926 that October 12 should be called 'Día de la Hispanidad' (Hispanic Day), until then known as 'Fiesta de la Raza' (Race Festivity), which had been celebrated for a decade. During Franco's regime, the Día de la Hispanidad was celebrated every October 12 – and continues today. The first celebration was in 1939, with 50,000 people attending in the city of Zaragoza and with the attendance of representatives from Latin American countries. The October 12 celebrations were not only an opportunity for Franco to address messages of fraternity to the Latin American countries but also allowed him to stage his power in large-scale events.

The CUP's Political Initiative

Until the 2010s the statue remained uncontested, becoming one of Barcelona's tourist icons. Although the symbolism of the pedestal pays homage to the history of the discovery of America and that of colonisation, the monument never had much political relevance until 2016.²⁷

²⁴ José Ángel Montañés, "¿Cuántos años tiene la estatua de Colón y dónde señala su dedo?" *El País*, September 28, 2016.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ David Marilhacy, "La Hispanidad bajo el franquismo. El americanismo al servicio de un proyecto nacionalista," In: *Imaginarios y representaciones de España durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2014).

²⁷ David León Himelfarb, "El futuro incierto de la estatua de Colón," *Barcelona Secreta*, May 6, 2022.

The first formal call for action against the monument occurred in 2016 when the left-wing pro-independence political party CUP,²⁸ a party characterised by their radical defence of Catalan independence, registered a proposal in the municipal plenary session proposing the immediate removal of the monument.²⁹ This measure was included in a broader proposal that also called for the removal of Spanish flags from public buildings, the declaration of October 12 as a working day as opposed to a national holiday, and the removal of the monument to the businessman Antonio López for his links to the slave trade.³⁰

The removal proposal included the relocation of the monument to a museum so it could be contextualised and could encourage a critical reflection on Spanish colonialism. Furthermore, the CUP also proposed to build a monument celebrating the American indigenous resistance against imperialism, oppression and segregation to replace the Columbus statue.³¹ However, the proposal did not find support from any other municipal groups. Although some groups were sympathetic to certain ideas in the proposal, this wasn't enough as they prioritised the historical value of the monument for Barcelona, describing it as an integral part of the city's identity. Joaquim Forn, a member of the city council who voted against the proposal, declared the majority point of view in the debate when he stated:

This is a symbol of Barcelona, an iconic monument that identifies the city in the eyes of the world. What city would do what you propose? We also defend the indigenous memory and the American liberation, but we want to do it without destroying the soul of our city.³²

The proposal was considered by many as a provocative proposal with no intention of becoming effective given the heterogeneity of the measures.³³ However, if this was the goal of CUP, it succeeded as it became the first time that political representatives in Barcelona questioned whether the iconic monument should or should not remain in public space. The contestation also had an international echo, featuring prominently in international media.³⁴

In 2018, Josep Borrell, from the Socialist Party PSOE, former Foreign Office Minister, during a visit to the US said that: 'the US achieved independence with practically no history and that the only thing they had done was to kill four Indians.'³⁵ Enraged with this statement and inspired by the city of Los Angeles, which had just removed their Columbus statue that same year, the CUP presented another formal proposal of removal at the Social Rights Commission of the Barcelona City Council, no more successful than the previous one.³⁶ Even less as groups that abstained from voting the last time, this time voted against the measure.³⁷ The proposal included the creation of a space where collectives working on the memory of the crimes committed during the colonisation of America could rethink the space of the

²⁸Since 2003, CUP is a national political organisation which 'works for an independent, socialist, ecologically sustainable, territorially balanced country, free from patriarchal forms of domination'. More information: <http://cup.cat/what-is-the-cup>.

²⁹ Clara Blanchar, "La CUP pedirá la retirada del monumento a Colón en Barcelona," *El País*, September 26, 2016.

³⁰ Minutes of the Barcelona City Council meeting of 30 September 2016, pp. 69-70.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barcelona City Council, "Plenari del Consell Municipal del 30/09/16" Youtube video, 4:01:41 posted by Barcelona Ajuntament.

³³ Antonio Fernández, "El plan de la CUP para Barcelona," *El Confidencial*, September 26, 2016.

³⁴ Sam Jones, "Call to topple Christopher Columbus statue from its Barcelona perch," *Guardian*, September 26, 2016.

³⁵ Público, "Borrel, sobre el exterminio de los indígenas en EEUU," *Público*, November 27, 2018.

³⁶ Ernest Alós, "La CUP se queda sola pidiendo la retirada 'inmediata' del monumento a Colón," *El Periodico*, December 12, 2018.

³⁷ Minutes of the Presidency, Citizens' rights, Participation and Security Commission of Barcelona City Council meeting of December 12, 2018.

monument and put it at the service of the historical memory of the city.

It was not the last formal proposal that CUP presented at the City Council, as in 2020, influenced by the Black Lives Matter protests taking place globally, they requested once more for the statue to be removed 'immediately.'³⁸ Eulàlia Reguant, a councilwoman for the CUP, pointed out that:

Barcelona must stop explaining the history of the victors and turn around the meaning of the statue of Columbus ... This historical figure initiated one of the greatest genocides in history and therefore should not be one of the prominent symbols of the city.

This time they were not alone, as Jéssica Albiach, president of the leftist party *En Comú Podem*, also vocally supported that the removal of the Columbus statue, stating that it 'would be a good measure' and that the National Holiday of October 12 celebrates the recognition of a figure 'who made possible the colonisation of some territories, with the genocide that he generated' after he arrived in America.³⁹ In response, the mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau acknowledged that this was a 'relevant and open debate for some time in the city' but that there was no agreed solution, proposing to keep the statue with a critical contextualisation about his figure.⁴⁰

The Impact of Antiracist Protests in Summer 2020

In the summer of 2020, following the wave of anti-racist and the Black Live Matters demonstrations after the murder of George Floyd, demonstrations were called in Barcelona by anti-racist groups. One of their demands was the removal of the Columbus statue, considered to be a celebration of colonialism.⁴¹ The participants carried banners against the exhibition of Columbus in the port of Barcelona as they gathered around the monument to ask for its removal. They considered that 'the discovery of America was the beginning of the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the continent.'⁴² Their demands were in unison with global the Black Lives Matter demands in other parts of the world where other statues of Columbus were being removed, as in Chicago⁴³ and Sacramento⁴⁴ both in 2020. Further, globally Columbus statues that had not been removed were targeted by protestors due to the inaction of their government, examples included a man in the Bahamas attacking the Columbus statue at the Government House in Nassau with a sledge hammer,⁴⁵ and in Barranquilla, Colombia, where protestors toppled down their Columbus statue in the anti-government protests of 2021.⁴⁶

Faced with an increasingly tense situation, the mayor of Barcelona declared her intention to contextualise the monument.⁴⁷ This would make it possible to maintain the monument's contribution to the city's identity while looking to the past with a critical and anti-racist spirit.

³⁸ Metropoli, "La CUP exige la retirada de estatua de Colón," *Metropoli*, June 19, 2020.

³⁹ Crónica Global, "La CUP insiste en retirar la estatua de Colón de Barcelona por su 'connotación racista'," *Crónica Global*, June 19, 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ EFE, "Manifestación antirracista en Barcelona y a favor de retirar la estatua de Colón," *El Diario*, June 14, 2020.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ BBC, "Christopher Columbus statues temporarily removed in Chicago," *BBC News*, July 24, 2020.

⁴⁴ Cuneyt Dil, "Columbus statue removed from California capitol rotunda," *AP News*, July 8, 2020.

⁴⁵ Tribune, "Man damages Christopher Columbus Statue with Sledge Hammer," *Tribune*, October 11, 2021.

⁴⁶ BBC, "Colombian anti-government protesters topple Columbus statue," *BBC*, June 29, 2021.

⁴⁷ Ada Colau, interview by Jordi Basté, *El món a RAC1*, RAC1, June 15, 2020.

To this end, she suggested the possibility of installing explanatory plaques or an exhibition next to the monument explaining the impact of Spanish imperialism and colonialism. She claimed that the council was in contact with historical memory experts to try to get to the best solution. However, as of October 2021, no progress has been announced in this matter.

Columbus and Spanish Nationalism

To fully understand the calls for removing the monument, we must take into account not only the colonial past but also the present clash between Spanish and Catalan nationalism. As explained before, Columbus Day is the national holiday in Spain, and it has a special significance in Catalonia. In a region marked by nationalism, national days are of huge importance. September 11 is Catalan national day, the *Diada*, which commemorates the assault of Barcelona by the troops of King Philip V in the 18th century.⁴⁸ Every year Barcelona becomes the centre for crowded demonstrations in support of Catalan nationalism and independence.



Figure 3: 'Diada in Barcelona'. Image by Assemblée Nacional Catalana via Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

The equivalent of this day for Spanish nationalism is the National holiday of *Día de la Hispanidad* on Columbus Day, October 12. Therefore, Columbus also became a symbol of Spanish nationalism, turning him into the target of Catalan nationalist's attacks. A good example of this rejection of the figure of Columbus and the symbolism of Spanish nationalism is the decision of many of the politicians of the Catalan nationalist parties to work every Columbus Day, although it is a national holiday,⁴⁹ and the already mentioned proposal of removing the monument presented in 2016 by the CUP.⁵⁰ Thus, removing Columbus from Barcelona would be symbolic of more than just removing traces of colonialism, but also of the removal of Spanish national symbols.

On the other hand, Columbus and the conquest of America are a glorifying myth and symbol for right-wing Spanish nationalists. Pablo Casado, the leader of the *Partido Popular*, the largest conservative and Spanish nationalist party, has expressed that the actions of Columbus represent 'humanity's most important milestone' and that no other country can claim to 'have discovered a new world.'⁵¹ Vox – one of the largest Spanish far-right party –⁵² and *Ciudadanos* – another of the largest right-wing parties –,⁵³ have also made declarations

⁴⁸ El Periódico, "Historia de la Diada," *El Periódico*, September 11, 2021.

⁴⁹ D. C., "La Generalitat dejará a los funcionarios trabajar el 12 de octubre y 6 de diciembre," ABC, August 5, 2019.

⁵⁰ Clara Blanchar, "La CUP pedirá la retirada del monumento a Colón en Barcelona," *El País*, September 26, 2016.

⁵¹ El Diario, "Pablo Casado: "¿Qué otro país puede decir que un nuevo mundo fue descubierto por ellos?,"" El Diario, October 14, 2018.

⁵² Cristián Meza, "VOX de España: "Gracias a Colón millones se liberaron de la barbarie en América,"" El Dínamo, June 14, 2020. ;

⁵³ Europa Press, "Ciudadanos quiere que el Gobierno proteste por el derribo de una estatua de Colón en Los Ángeles," Europa Press, November 25, 2018.

defending the figure of Columbus as an illustrious and celebrated figure in the history of Spain. The common admiration of Spanish conservatism for the figure of Columbus was publicly evidenced in 2019, when the three main right-wing parties intended to send the message that they were allied against Catalan nationalists, and deliberately chose Madrid's Columbus Monument as the place that would host the first picture of these three parties together.⁵⁴

The controversy surrounding Columbus as a figure also took over public debate in Spain. On the one hand, supporters for the removal of the statue argue that it is a celebration of colonialism and an offence to the victims of genocide.⁵⁵ Recent historical research that shows Columbus himself committed torture when working as a governor of the territory in America has further fueled his condemnation.⁵⁶ On the other hand, supporters of the monument defend the idea that what occurred in 1492 wasn't an invasion or genocide but was instead merely a meeting of two worlds, and that the important changes in the world that came as a result of the expedition should be celebrated.⁵⁷

The tensions between these two views arise every October 12 on Columbus Day, with a rising intensity in recent years. Columbus Day celebrations in Barcelona tend to involve symbolic Spanish nationalist acts around Columbus Monument. Tensions between the different sides of the conflict, and demonstrations and counter-demonstrations are becoming more frequent due to the polarisation of the Catalan-Spanish conflict and the wave of anti-racist demonstrations globally. In June 2020, shortly after the mayor's declarations on the contextualisation of the monument and the protests held by antiracist movements, the far-right party Vox called for a demonstration in front of the monument to protest against the contextualisation plans and to express their support for the monument and Columbus' legacy to remain untouched in its present form.⁵⁸ Furthermore, far-right groups and Francoist supporters celebrated the national day next to the monument, waving fascist flags and burning pictures of Catalan nationalist leaders.⁵⁹ In response, anti-fascist and anti-colonial groups organised a counter-demonstration, which ended with a protest action consisting of the burning of a replica of the statue in the same square where the monument is located.⁶⁰

Decision-Making Processes

The Colonial Barcelona Program

As explained before, the contextualisation plans expressed by mayor Ada Colau have not yet been implemented nor have the details been specified. In this sense, no final decision has been made on how to respond to the demand of removing the monument. However, a discrete project has been going on in Barcelona since March 2016, when the city council launched a program named *Barcelona Colonial*. The intention was to create a space for

⁵⁴ Ricardo Rubio, "Colón.- Abascal, Casado y Rivera posan en la foto final de la concentración," Europa Press, February 10, 2019.

⁵⁵ Marta Maroto, "Activistas antirracistas cuelgan una pancarta de la estatua de Colón de Madrid para pedir su derribo: "Fuego al orden colonial"," *El Diario*, July 17, 2020.

⁵⁶ Consuelo Varela and Isabel Aguirre. *La Caída De Cristóbal Colón : El Juicio De Bobadilla*. (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2006).

⁵⁷ Isabel Morillo, "Descendientes y estudiosos de Colón: "No es revisionismo, es vandalismo"," *El Confidencial*, June 21, 2020.

⁵⁸ Europa Press, "Vox defiende la estatua de Colón de Barcelona ante "los ataques de los vándalos," *El Diario*, June 27, 2020.

⁵⁹ Júlia Requé, "12-O en BCN: Ofrenda a Colón, bendición a la virgen del Pilar y 'Cara al sol'," *El Periódico*, October 12 2020.

⁶⁰ EFE, "Manifestantes queman una réplica de la estatua de Colón en Barcelona," *El Diario*, October 12, 2020.

dialogue on the memorial transmission of colonial narratives and, in particular, for the symbolic expression of these narratives in the public space.⁶¹

In the frame of this program, seminars and conferences have been organised to critically rethink the colonial past of Barcelona. Some of these events focused specifically on the Columbus Monument, such as the second seminar, in which Gustau Nerín⁶² and Stéphane Michonneau⁶³ gave lectures on the reasons that led to the existence of the monument. In a conversation with Nerín, Michonneau shares his opinion on what should happen with the statue, in line with the opinion of Major Colau:

I am in favour of coming to terms with the past, whatever it may be. We have an imperialist and colonialist past, but things have to be accepted. Perhaps what should be done is to explain to people with posters and leaflets what this monument represents and help to situate it in the Catalonia of today. The Columbus monument is part of Barcelona's heritage and must be preserved.⁶⁴

The latest *Barcelona Colonial's* event, *Colo(m)ialismes*, was held in December 2020. *Colo(m)ialismes* was an international webinar on colonialism and the Columbus Monument. It was the biggest event that has been organised within the program to discuss specifically the Columbus figure and its relation with colonialism. In the context of this event, some of the best experts in Barcelona's colonial history were invited to explain their views and to discuss with citizens and policymakers.⁶⁵ This event illustrates the existence of ongoing discussions and consultations happening between policymakers, experts and citizens to reach social agreements on what ought to be done with the monument. The local government is the one organising this debate through the *Colonial Barcelona* program, and according to their interventions in the different debates occurring in 2016⁶⁶ and 2018⁶⁷ regarding the removal of the Columbus Monument, they rely on these consultations to make their final decision.

The program has already led to changes in the public space in Barcelona. For example, the process that led to the removal of Antonio López's statue was a part of *Colonial Barcelona*. A similar process might happen with the final decision on what to do with Columbus Monument. In 2010, the biggest trade unions in Spain were already organising big demonstrations against the López's statue,⁶⁸ while no action occurred to the Columbus Monument until 2016, without reported protests in the streets until 2020. The lesser public support for the removal of the Columbus Monument and the direct relationship between the monument and Barcelona's identity makes this process slower and longer. However, the increase in the frequency and intensity of demonstrations and the bigger presence of the issue in the public debate partly thanks to the *Colonial Barcelona* program, is likely to lead to action in the short term.

⁶¹ "Barcelona Colonial", Barcelona City Council, accessed 18 March, 2020.

⁶² Gustau Nerín, "Following the footprints of colonial Barcelona," Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

⁶³ Stéphane Michonneau, "Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?," Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

⁶⁴ Gustau Nerín, "Stéphane Michonneau: "El Colón de Barcelona es más capitalista que colonialista"," *El Nacional Cat*, November 13, 2016.

⁶⁵ "Colo(m)ialismes", *European Observatory on Memories*, accessed on March 18, 2021.

⁶⁶ Minutes of the Barcelona City Council meeting of 30 September 2016.

⁶⁷ Minutes of the Presidency, Citizens' rights, Participation and Security Commission of Barcelona City Council meeting of December 12, 2018.

⁶⁸ Europa Press, "CC.OO. y UGT piden retirar la estatua de un traficante de esclavos en Barcelona," *Europa Press*, October 7, 2010.

Summary and Conclusions

Spanish colonial past has been rather celebrated than criticised but the irruption of anti-racist and anti-colonial movements are a sign of change in the perception of the nation's past. In this context, the Columbus Monument in Barcelona has become a controversial topic, mainly the symbolic and mythical nature of Columbus as part of the Spanish national identity.

Given the sensitivity of the controversy in a moment of nationalistic tensions, the council has decided to launch initiatives that intend to inform the population on the colonial past of Barcelona and the different ways to address it, instead of taking a radical position as it would be to remove a monument that is part of the city's identity. The Mayor of the city, Ada Colau, has defended her decision to leave the monument where it is but to contextualise it so it addresses the city's colonial past. How it will be done, if a plaque in the monument or an exhibition nearby, has not been decided yet. However, the creation of public debates on colonialism and less controversial actions, like the one which occurred with the Antonio López statue, seem to be the approach taken by the local government as of March 2021.

Research contributed by Francisco Moreno Ordone and Paula O'Donohoe

Last updated October 2021

References

- Alós, Ernest. "La CUP se queda sola pidiendo la retirada 'inmediata' del monumento a Colón." *El Periódico*, December 12, 2018. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/barcelona/20181212/cup-pide-retirada-estatua-colon-7198872>.
- Barcelona City Council. "Barcelona Colonial" Barcelona City Council. Accessed 18 March, 2020. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/memoriademocratica/es/programa/barcelona-colonial/>.
- Barcelona City Council. *Minutes of the Presidency, Citizens' rights, Participation and Security Commission of Barcelona City Council meeting of December 12, 2018*. December 12, 2018.
- Barcelona City Council. *Minutes of the Barcelona City Council meeting of 30 September 2016*. September 30, 2016.
- BBC. "Christopher Columbus statues temporarily removed in Chicago." *BBC News*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-53530752>.
- BBC. "Colombian anti-government protesters topple Columbus statue." *BBC*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57651833>.
- Blanchar, Clara. "La CUP pedirá la retirada del monumento a Colón en Barcelona." *El País*, September 26, 2016. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2016/09/26/catalunya/1474889171_065220.html?event_log=oklogin.
- Colau, Ada. "Interview with Ada Colau," By Jordi Basté. *El món a RAC1*, RAC1, (June 15, 2020).

- Crónica Global. "La CUP insiste en retirar la estatua de Colón de Barcelona por su 'connotación racista.'" *Crónica Global*, June 19, 2020. https://cronicaglobal.lespanol.com/politica/cup-estatua-colon-barcelona_359532_102.html.
- D. C. "La Generalitat dejará a los funcionarios trabajar el 12 de octubre y 6 de diciembre." *ABC*, August 5, 2019. https://www.abc.es/espana/catalunya/politica/abci-generalitat-dejara-funcionarios-trabajar-12-octubre-y-6-diciembre-201908051044_noticia.html.
- Dil, Cuneyt. "Columbus statue removed from California capitol rotunda." *AP News*, July 8, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/c6ab9707e744352b0bebe47b054c1bd9>.
- EFE. "Manifestación antirracista en Barcelona y a favor de retirar la estatua de Colón." *El Diario*, June 14, 2020. https://www.eldiario.es/politica/manifestacion-antirracista-barcelona-retirar-colon_1_6013017.html.
- EFE. "Manifestantes queman una réplica de la estatua de Colón en Barcelona." *El Diario*, October 12, 2020. https://www.eldiario.es/agencias/manifestantes-queman-una-replica-de-la-estatua-de-colon-en-barcelona_1_6286900.html.
- El Diario. "Pablo Casado: "¿Qué otro país puede decir que un nuevo mundo fue descubierto por ellos?"" *El Diario*, October 14, 2018. https://www.eldiario.es/politica/pablo-casado-puede-decir-descubierto_1_1889248.html.
- El Periódico. "Historia de la Diada." *El Periódico*, September 11, 2021. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20210911/historia-diada-catalunya-11-setembre-1714-5391464>.
- Europa Press. "CC.OO. y UGT piden retirar la estatua de un traficante de esclavos en Barcelona." *Europa Press*, October 7, 2010. <https://m.europapress.es/catalunya/noticia-ccoo-ugt-piden-retirar-estatua-trafficante-esclavos-barcelona-20101007142003.html>.
- Europa Press. "Vox defiende la estatua de Colón de Barcelona ante "los ataques de los vándalos"." *El Diario*, June 27, 2020. https://www.eldiario.es/politica/vox-defiende-colon-barcelona-vandalos_1_6049085.html.
- Europa Press. "Ciudadanos quiere que el Gobierno proteste por el derribo de una estatua de Colón en Los Ángeles." *Europa Press*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-ciudadanos-quiere-gobierno-proteste-derribo-estatua-colon-angeles-20181125124317.html>.
- European Observatory of Memories. "Colo(m)ialismes." *European Observatory on Memories*, accessed on March 18, 2021. <https://europeanmemories.net/activities/colomialismes/>.
- Fabre, Jaume, Josep M. Huertas, and Judit Subirachs i Burgaya. "Monument a Cristòfor Colom." Barcelona City Council, accessed March 18, 2021, http://w10.bcn.cat/APPS/gmocataleg_monum/FitxaMonumentAc.do?idioma=ES&codiMonumIntern=102&cerca=null.
- Fernández, Antonio. "El plan de la CUP para Barcelona." *El Confidencial*, September 26, 2016. https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2016-09-26/plan-cup-barcelonacris-tobal-colon-rojigualda_1266147/.
- Gaceta de Madrid. 1892. Madrid: 269.
- Jones, Sam. "Call to topple Christopher Columbus statue from its Barcelona perch." *Guardian*, September 26, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/27/call-to-topple-christopher-columbus-statue-from-its-barcelona-perch>.

- La Vanguardia. "Un pequeño incendio quema la estatua de Colón en Barcelona en plena oleada por las marchas antirracistas." *La Vanguardia*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20200628/482004977466/incendio-colon-estatua-barcelona-vandalismo.html>.
- Himelfarb, David León. "El futuro incierto de la estatua de Colón." *Barcelona Secreta*, May 6, 2022. <https://barcelonasecreta.com/futuro-estatua-colon-polemica/>.
- Marilhacy, David. "La Hispanidad bajo el franquismo. El americanismo al servicio de un proyecto nacionalista." In: *Imaginario y representaciones de España durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2014): 73-102. <https://books.openedition.org/cvz/1161?lang=en>.
- Marimon, Sílvia. "Desmuntant Colom: Què hi ha rere la icona?" *ARA*, October 2, 2016. https://www.ara.cat/cultura/desmuntant-colom-que-rere-icona_1_1200454.html.
- Maroto, Marta. "Activistas antirracistas cuelgan una pancarta de la estatua de Colón de Madrid para pedir su derribo: "Fuego al orden colonial"." *El Diario*, July 17, 2020. https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/activistas-antirracistas-cuelgan-pancarta-estatua-colon-madrid-fuego-orden-colonial_1_6112115.html.
- Metropoli. "La CUP exige la retirada de estatua de Colón." *Metropoli*, June 19, 2020. https://www.metropoliabierta.com/informacion-municipal/cup-exige-retirada-estatua-colon_28621_102.html.
- Meza, Cristián. "VOX de España: "Gracias a Colón millones se liberaron de la barbarie en América"." *El Dínamo*, June 14, 2020. <https://www.eldinamo.cl/actualidad/2020/06/11/vox-barbarie-gracias-a-colon/>.
- Michonneau, Stéphane. "Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?." Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/memoriademocratica/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Per-que-un-monument-de-Colom-a-Barcelona-Michonneau-%C3%A1-en-GB.pdf>.
- Montañés, José Ángel. "¿Cuántos años tiene la estatua de Colón y dónde señala su dedo?" *El País*, September 28, 2016. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2016/09/28/catalunya/1475056077_833339.html.
- Morillo, Isabel. "Descendientes y estudiosos de Colón: "No es revisionismo, es vandalismo"." *El Confidencial*, June 21, 2020. https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/andalucia/2020-06-21/anunciada-colon-expurgar-quemar-bibliotecas-nazis_2647743/.
- Nerín, Gustau. "Following the footprints of Colonial Barcelona." Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.
- Nerín, Gustau. "Stéphane Michonneau: "El Colón de Barcelona es más capitalista que colonialista"." *El Nacional Cat*, November 13, 2016. https://www.elnacional.cat/es/cultura/stephane-michonneau-monumento-colon_120279_102.html.
- Público. "Borrell, sobre el exterminio de los indígenas en EEUU." *Público*, November 27, 2018. <https://www.publico.es/politica/josep-borrell-borrell-exterminio-indigenas-eeuu-unico-hicieron-matar-cuatro-indios.html>.
- Requé, Júlia. "12-O en BCN: Ofrenda a Colón, bendición a la virgen del Pilar y 'Cara al sol'." *El Periódico*, October 12, 2020. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20201012/12-octubre-barcelona-colon-cara-al-sol-8152690>.
- Rubio, Ricardo. "Colón.- Abascal, Casado y Rivera posan en la foto final de la concentración." *Europa Press*, February 10, 2019. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-colon-abascal-casado-rivera-posan-foto-final-concentracion-20190210133320.html>.

- Tribune. "Man damages Christopher Columbus Statue with Sledge Hammer." *Tribune*, October 11, 2021.
<http://www.tribune242.com/news/2021/oct/09/man-damages-christopher-columbus-statue-sledge-ham/>
- Varela, Consuelo, and Isabel Aguirre. *La Caída De Cristóbal Colón : El Juicio De Bobadilla*: Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2006.
- Zapatero, Carlos. "¿Hacia dónde señala el dedo de Colón?" *Metropoli*, October 7, 2019.
https://www.metropoliabierta.com/vivir-en-barcelona/curiosidades-monumento-colon-dedo_18611_102.html.

Figures

- Juanedc. "Monumento a Colón." Flickr, August 8, 2011.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/juanedc/8637748477>. (Cover Image)
- Seudonimoanonimo. "File: Ángeles." Flickr, September 19, 2008.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/22890631@N03/2871644747>. (Figure 1)
- Catalan Art & Architecture Gallery (Josep Bracons). "File: A. Vallmitjana Abarca, lleons del monument a Colom, Barcelona." Flickr, December 5, 2011.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/47267169@N05/6476639911>. (Figure 2)
- Assemblea Catalana Nacional. "File: Diada_Tram Arago Aribau Muntaner_JaumeGual (37)." Flickr, September 11, 2017.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/assemblea/36484924164/in/album-72157686469409243/>. (FIGURE 3)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. 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.

The Contested Histories project 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, and, 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 EuroClio - European Association for History Educators 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.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen

Program Director

+33 66828327

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139

2585HP The Hague The Netherlands

secretariat@euroclio.eu

www.euroclio.eu

Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021

This document is copyright © The Contested Histories Initiative 2021

Some right reserved [CC BY 4.0](#)

To cite this publication:

The Contested Histories Initiative, "Columbus Statue in Barcelona, Spain", *Contested Histories Case Study #143* (January 2023), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

