

## **The Removal of Historical Monuments: are we cannibalizing the past?** **Should we respect its otherness?**

During the 21st Century, there have been two ways to cope with the mistakes and wounds from the past. One has been the reinforcement of “historical memory”, a key topic in some countries like Spain, with a not-so-recent Civil War that even now still raises some hackles. The other way is the “forget and forgive” method, which is, in the opinion of many, very unsatisfactory.

Thus, where does the removal of historical monuments belong between these two categories? At first, it could fit into the second, because it aims to symbolically erase the outrageous traces of a disgraceful past by “physically” removing its representations from the public view. Nevertheless, these actions could also be portrayed as part of the implementation of historical memory, as the removal of controversial figures and monuments is supposed to recognize the suffering of their victims.

In order to analyse the success (or not) of this practice, we must discuss to what extent the removal of historical monuments is necessary and to what extent it is effective. On the one hand, I consider that a city and its monuments play a huge role in building the identity of the citizens and the international image of the country. People feel identified with their most world-famous known monuments and symbols even if they are disgruntled with the State administration and politics of their country.

For example, a lot of Spanish people complain about Spain, its corruption, high unemployment rates etc., but those same people will proudly express they are Spanish in any other part of the world when any Spanish symbol, food, or praiseworthy historical figure appear in the conversation. What I mean by this is that it is impossible to separate a city from its citizens (or a country). This “natural” bond necessarily includes the implications it has to keep figures and monuments which commemorate or praise war crime perpetrators, or dictators. Or is it a coincidence that Melilla, the last city of Spain that kept a Franco’ statue until a few months ago, is the city with the largest Francoist support bases?

So, answering the first question, the removal of controversial historical monuments is absolutely necessary... if the country in question wants to portray a democratic image, aligned with Human Rights, to the international community. It’s a matter of narrative coherence. You can’t advocate for human rights or peace in the world if you keep symbols that represent the contrary, with no intention to move them away. It’s simply incoherent.

On the other hand, let’s discuss the effectiveness. The fact that the removal of historical monuments is a practice inherited from the French Revolution reveals a lot about its social component. The removal isn’t about making a physical change on the streets. To be actually effective it has to come along with a prior social awareness-raising exercise. After the death of George Floyd in 2020, many European countries had to face the rage of citizens who went out to the streets to tear down racist statues.

The movement reached the Parliaments and some countries decided to move away racists' monuments and statues legally. This sheds light on the fact that political measures regarding historical memory have to be triggered by a social reaction; by a social reassurance that something's wrong. However, it should go beyond that. If we don't educate new generations about why this is happening, eventually many controversial monuments will remain over time as symbols of cities populated by people who don't know who they are or what they did, and therefore will not complain about it. Thus, to be effective, the removal of historical monuments has to be more than a "technical" or a "political" movement, but rather an act motivated by social awareness throughout time.

In conclusion, the removal of historical monuments isn't cannibalization of the past, either it is an exaggerated measure. A city represents its inhabitants; a country is represented internationally by the symbols and monuments they praise and conserve. What would be London without Big Ben? What would be Los Angeles without its Hollywood Walk of Fame? If a country wants to display a respectable image, everything to which it dedicates space, admiration, or privilege (such as naming a street, a park or a library after it), should also be respectable.

Finally, I would like to finish this reflection with a quote by Italian historian Enzo Traverso:

"Tearing down statues does not erase history; it makes us see it more clearly".