A Public History of Monuments

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Recent controversies over monuments question not only who should be represented and commemorated in the public space but also who can decide whether to remove or not the monuments. In doing so, those controversies relate to the constant making, interpretation, and use of history in the public space. This article discusses how public history – whose aim is to make history production more public by focusing on accessibility, engagement and participation – can play a role in public debates about contested monuments. Public history can set the ground for more informed decisions on the preservation, removal or destruction of monuments. Those decisions are all the more important as they relate to demands for inclusive reinterpretation and decolonisation of national pasts. The article looks at several projects (Europe, in the Americas, and in South Africa) to remove monuments and their impact on the historical understanding of the past in the public space. In addition to historicising spaces and monuments, public history can play a major role in developing collaborative practices and fostering a more inclusive approach to history production.

Keywords: Public history, monuments, decolonisation, space, coproduction

In recent years, monuments have been hitting the headlines all over the world. Public debates have not focused so much on the erection of new monuments as on the controversies regarding their preservation, removal or destruction. As symbols of power, monuments are contested representations of the past.[1] While the destruction of monuments is not new – for instance, many were destroyed during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century – the number of recent controversies in various parts of the world (Central Europe, South Africa, Argentina, Colombia, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, to give just a few examples) raises questions about changing public interpretation of the past.[2] While the fate of monuments can be dictated by the context of war (for instance destruction of Saddam Hussein's statue in 2003) or through the change of regimes (destruction of sixth-century Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001), this article primarily focuses on monuments whose removal or destruction follows public actions from civil society.

The debates over whom should be represented, remembered, and celebrated in the public space relate to the constant redefinitions and reinterpretations of the past. The national dimensions of monuments can be challenged for several reasons. Monuments can be removed or destroyed because some groups perceived them as celebrating foreign – to the nation – powers (Rhodes statue in South Africa or Soviet monuments in post-communist countries). Monuments can also be contested because they celebrate colonial powers and structures. Their removal can then be part of a process of decolonization of the public space. Those examples question not only what and whom to commemorate in the public space, but also who can decide whether or not to remove monuments.[3] These questions directly address the public dimension of the history-making, the public history of monuments.

In the words of British historian Ludmilla Jordanova, the past is more than ever considered as public property and subject to many different

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interpretations.[4] Trained historians are merely one type of participant in public interpretations of the past. What is more, Mark Tebeau shows that debates about monuments come much more from grassroot activities than from historians.[5] Especially with the rise of social media, it has become increasingly easy for people to share their views and opinions about the past. In this context, trained historians need to reconsider their role in public debates and discuss the need to understand the history of/through monuments. In this article, I explore how public history – an approach to history that focuses on public access and participation – can contribute not only to a better understanding of monuments but also to the difficult question of what to do with contested structures.[6]

The article begins by exploring what public history is, how it developed and how it may create new opportunities to improve understanding of monuments. The history of monuments matters as it plays a part in discussions – and ultimately decisions – on their fate and future. Participatory interpretation of monuments is a crucial process, albeit a challenging one. It can help us understand the controversies that emerge regarding certain monuments in a broader context. Public debates about monuments can also help shed new light on the overall historical interpretation process, raising the question of who can interpret the past and highlighting issues about historical authority, expertise and ownership. Questions such as who owns the past and who can decide what historical events, figures and themes should be remembered through monuments are being reconsidered. Based on examples from various parts of the world, the final part of the article showcases several specific projects that removed and re-historicised monuments to provide a richer understanding of the past.

Communication, Engagement, Participation: The Three Pillars of Public History

From Historical Interpretation to a Public His'tree

Public history developed as a field of historical studies in the United States in the 1970s.[7] Less radical than the People's History movement or Raphael Samuel's History Workshops in the United Kingdom, the field of public history developed in North America as a means to broaden the definition, space, and actors of the history-making process. Defined initially by Robert Kelley as referring 'to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia', public history emerged both as a possible solution for the job crisis facing trained historians and as a way to connect practitioners in and outside academia.[8]

It has given rise to university degree programmes, a national association, a journal and multiple events, becoming a solid and institutionalised field of practice. The National Council on Public History (NCPH) – the main organisation for public history in the United States – lists more than 300 study programmes. Although public history emerged in the United States, it has now taken on an international dimension. In addition to the creation of the International Federation for Public History in 2011, national networks and associations exist in Brazil, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, Italy and Spain.[9] The success and appeal of public history partly come from the fact that its development coincided with international debates on the role of history and historians in contemporary societies.

Although the term 'public history' was coined relatively recently, it deals with long-established practices of communicating, sharing and applying historical research and methodology beyond the confines of academia. These practices include heritage conservation, oral history, archiving

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and collection management, and public historical interpretation. British historian Ludmilla Jordanova thus presents the field as a way to gather practices under a common name. She defines public history as 'an umbrella term, one which, furthermore, brings together two concepts 'public' and 'history' which are particularly slippery and difficult to define'.[10] While the notion cannot be defined simply, the association between 'public' and 'history' stresses the relevance of developing public
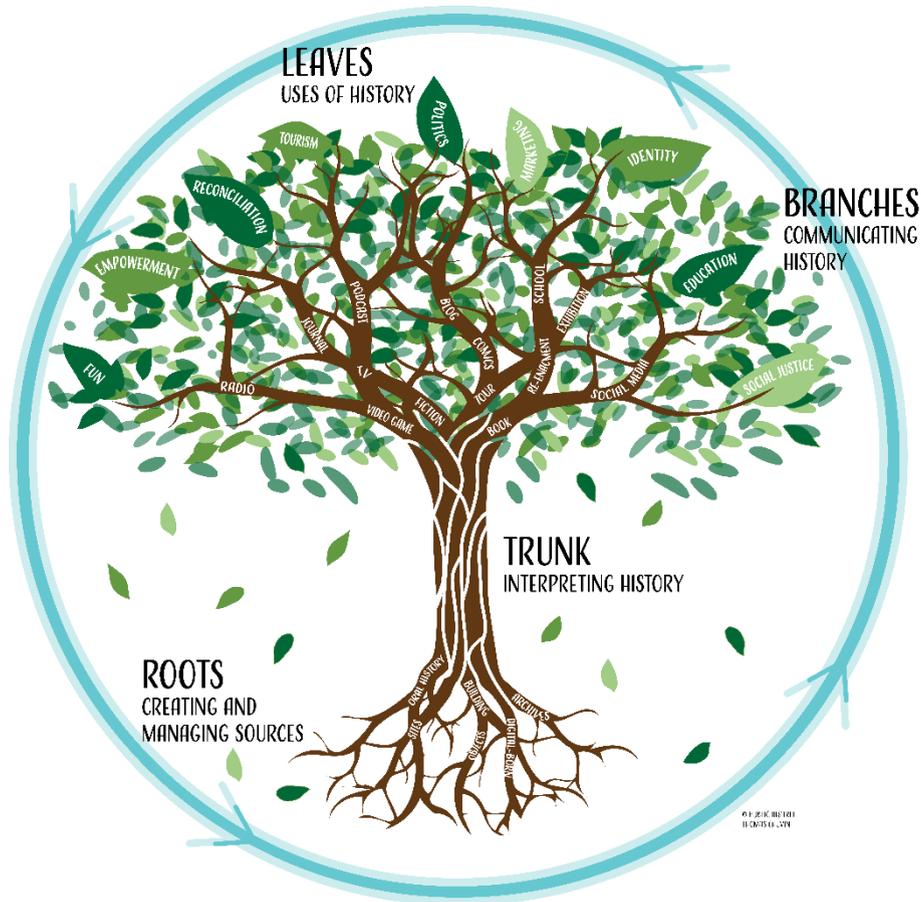
Figure 1: The *Public His'Tree*

accessibility, public engagement and public participation in the process of history-making. Public history aims to broaden this process, which I describe as the *Public His'Tree*.[11]

The *Public His'tree* (figure 1) is divided into four parts: the roots, the trunk, the branches and the leaves. The roots reflect the creation and preservation of sources. Public history includes archiving, managing collections in museums and other repositories, preserving sites and historical buildings and digitising sources. The trunk is about the analysis and interpretation of sources. The branches represent the communication of historical interpretations to a variety of audiences. Public history can be practised through traditional books and articles but also through more popular media such as exhibitions, graphic novels, guided tours, virtual reality reconstructions, re-enactments and podcasts. The leaves are the multiple public uses of these interpretations. The fact that history is consumed – and used – in many different ways is not new.[12] History can have many purposes, some of which may include marketing, politics, education, identity, empowerment and simply fun. This does not mean that all uses and applications of history are equally significant – there are many debatable political and marketing-related uses of history, for instance – but practitioners cannot ignore how historical research and interpretations are used, consumed and applied by various public groups and individuals.

The parts of the tree are separate, but they belong to an overall system; they work better when they connect to each other. The more the parts of the tree are connected, the richer and more coherent public history becomes. The structure is not linear; for instance, the uses (leaves) often influence what we deem important to collect and preserve (roots). According to this structure, public history connects therefore with monuments in several ways. Monuments are sources that embody and reflect how certain groups chose to represent the past in specific

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contexts. Monuments are a medium to communicate a certain interpretation of the past, so they can also appear as branches on the *Public His'Tree*. However, the recent public debates about monuments have tended to focus on the other parts of the tree. Their preservation or destruction connects with the roots of the tree, and their removal and installation in museums relates to their reinterpretation (trunk) and the various uses made of them by different public groups and communities (leaves). The multiple links between monuments and the *Public His'Tree* demonstrate that trained historians should not limit their work to studying monuments; they can also contribute to broadening public understanding of the past. This *Public His'Tree* structure works best in democratic societies where public interpretations of the past are open to discussion and not dictated by authoritarian regimes. Making history more public is also achieved by accepting and developing participatory constructions of historical narratives.

Doing History Together: Participatory Public History

Public history is not only about producing and delivering public historical content; it is also about working with the public. Making history more public means encouraging more public engagement and participation. Public history fosters collaboration at each stage of the process, in each part of the *Public His'Tree*. While collaboration with other scholars and professionals in different fields is not new, collaborating with non-specialists has recently emerged as a widespread public history practice. Owing to the multiple partners and participants in public history, some scholars, inspired by the work of political scientists, have argued for the use of the term 'publics' instead of 'public', to acknowledge the multiple views and constant debates on how to interpret and represent the past.[13] In the introduction to his *Companion to Public History*, David Dean observes that 'those in the field tend to talk of the public, but given the diversity and complexity of the audiences of

public history, I would argue that it is more useful to think about publics' because 'speaking of publics rather than the public compels us to be more nuanced in our analyses of historical representations and also when we come to talk about agency in public history'.[14]

In public history, publics are not a passive audience; they often engage and participate in projects. The notion of a shared authority, conceptualised by Michael Frisch to describe the dual authority in oral history – narrator and interviewer –, has been at the forefront of public history.[15] The concept of a shared authority exemplifies how public history invites trained historians and other professionals to accept, acknowledge, and support the participation of a variety of actors in interpreting the past.

Shared authority and public participation do not mean that trained historians lose their authority or are any less needed in public debates. On the contrary, a collaborative approach reasserts the need for trained historians, but with different roles. Historians do not control the debates. Trained historians can help publics to better understand the history of monuments, but they can also help in setting up collaborative practices. Instead of acting as missionaries bringing knowledge to passive audiences, historians should contribute to creating collaborative frameworks for the discussion and interpretation of monuments. In 2006, Barbara Franco pointed out that the 'role of the historian or scholar in civic dialogue must be focused on creating safe places for disagreement rather than on documenting facts or achieving a coherent thesis'.[16] This is not limited to civic dialogue and refers to public history at large. Much more than simply disseminating knowledge, historians can also contribute to the construction of public framework to collaboratively interpret monuments and the past.

When it comes to the roots of the *Public His'Tree*, public participation can be a way of collecting new sources to document the past. The concept of

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a shared authority has received increased attention with the rise of digital technology, especially the opportunities for participation developed with the Web 2.0. Beginning in the early 2000s, the proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies has allowed users to easily create, edit and share content through crowdsourcing and citizen science projects. Participants can take part in various stages of the history-making process. They can help transcribe digital primary sources (see

Figure 2: History Harvest in Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg)

for instance the Transcribe Bentham project), they can help collect new archives (see the *Collabarchive*) and they can attend public collecting events such as *history harvests* (see figure 2), bringing personal objects or documents to be digitised and researched by trained historians, archivists or other collection managers.[17]

Even more engaging is the participatory selection of what should be preserved. In historic preservation, some projects have developed and used what is called a 'charrette' – a sort of workshop approach to plan a project or activity. Since deciding what to preserve in a neighbourhood or community often raises disagreements and can polarise groups, some projects have developed the charrette approach as a collaborative problem-solving tool, involving stakeholders such as community members, developers, business owners, city planners, government officials, architects and engineers. They are divided into sub-groups that work to propose answers to an identified problem and present their ideas to the whole group at the end of the session. Ideas are compiled into reports that are presented and discussed by decision-makers.[18] This problem-solving approach has been used in some of the controversies about Confederate monuments in the United States and monuments associated with colonialism in the United Kingdom. In Canada, the statue of John A. Macdonald, the country's first Prime Minister, was toppled from its place in Montreal in August 2020 in protest at his treatment of indigenous communities. An 'After Macdonald Group' was created 'to encourage reflection about how the space on or around the monument might be repurposed through the introduction of temporary installations.'[19]

Making History More Public: Understanding the History of Monuments

In their *History Manifesto*, David Armitage and Jo Guildi regret the absence of long-term historical understanding of the past in our societies. Public history can help reposition monuments in a broader and longer-term context.[20] Public debates on what to do with contested monuments need to be informed by a historical understanding of what those monuments are and what they tell us about the past. Context matters: not all monuments belong to a single category and it is therefore impossible to come up with one-for-all arguments on what to do with contested monuments. Instead, trained historians can help foster an understanding of what monuments are (really) about.

In July 2021, the city of Lafayette in Louisiana (United States) removed the statue of General Alfred Mouton, a Confederate soldier, after five years of controversy. Former state senator Elbert Guillory was against the statue's removal to begin with and said 'I've seen this as part of the national movement to destroy history and to rewrite history or to erase history, which is dumb.'[21] Taking a different side, Keisha N. Blain explained in the *Washington Post* that 'destroying Confederate monuments isn't 'erasing' history. It's learning from it.'[22] But what history are these two different sides talking about? It is important for trained historians to help the public to understand what monuments are about. The motto 'Museums Are Not Neutral', which emerged after the fatal killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (United States), could equally be adapted to monuments. 'Monuments Are Not Neutral' and their history needs to be deconstructed.

Monuments are representations of the past; they are not the past. Historians need to do what they know best: bring historical perspectives to public debates. Monuments were created in specific contexts. For

instance, a monument about the American Civil War (1861-1865) tells us more about when it was erected than about the war itself. This monument is a primary source which tells us that, in a certain context,

Figure 3: Dietmar Rabich / Wikimedia Commons / 'London, Trafalgar Square, Nelson's Column -- 2016 -- 4851' / CC BY-SA 4.0

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a certain group of people chose how to remember the past and who and what should be remembered. Historians can therefore apply their methodology to help understand monuments as sources.

It is possible to interpret monuments' visual narratives and what representations of the past they convey. Some monuments glorify and highlight heroes; others mourn and focus on loss and victims. Other criteria should also be considered to elucidate the narratives and impact of monuments. Where the monument stands is highly relevant. Many monuments are in the public space, and as such their publicness should be discussed. Athabile Nonxuba, a student activist who was involved in the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town in

Figure 4: *Lest We Forget* War Memorial on the Grand Parade in Cork, Ireland, William Murphy, 2017, CC BY-SA 2.0

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South Africa, explained that Cecil Rhodes' statue overlooked the whole campus from the top of the hill, imposing its colonial ideology on the entire campus.[23] In his view, this example of colonial construction of space was one of the reasons why students wanted to remove the statue of someone who participated so actively in the colonisation of South Africa.

Monuments in the public space are also differently accessible ; the space around monuments can be more or less inclusive (allowing or not public interaction). Many nineteenth-century monuments that were designed to represent and celebrate nations were, for instance, not directly accessible. They were often installed on pedestals or columns – like for instance the statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson (figure 3), who died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, in London's Trafalgar Square –, making them remote and untouchable, and they frequently celebrated unapproachable white men from the military elites. In that sense, those monuments appear detached from the public. Other monuments like some commemorating the First World War (figure 4) were more reachable and included a mourning space. Their function was not so much to impose a universal and unquestionable national identity as to allow civilians to remember and mourn victims. Monuments assign political narratives to spaces. It is no wonder then that one of the first acts of new regimes is to tear down and remove monuments from previous political systems – for example the removal of Queen Victoria's statue in Dublin after Ireland gained independence, the destruction of the statue of King George III by American patriots in 1776 or the removal of Soviet monuments after the dismantling of the USSR.

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Figure 5: Statue of Jefferson Davis, 'subtly improved by local artists'. Graffiti inscription 'SLAVE OWNER'; photo Bart Everson (CC BY 2.0)

Monuments are not neutral; they reflect and are born out of social and power relations. Monuments represent the dominant narratives of groups who, at a certain time and in a certain space, were powerful enough to choose what and how to represent the past. This is particularly clear for Confederate monuments in the United States (figure 5).[24] These monuments celebrating the Confederacy, which in part was fighting to preserve the slavery system in the South during the US Civil War (1861-1865), have received lot of attention over the past decade. The monuments are post-Civil War representations and they tell us about changing public interpretations. The chronology (figure 6) of their construction clearly shows two main periods: the 1910s and the 1960s. They reflect the rise of white supremacists and Lost Cause discourses, especially through the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As such, they are much more representative of the history of white supremacy in
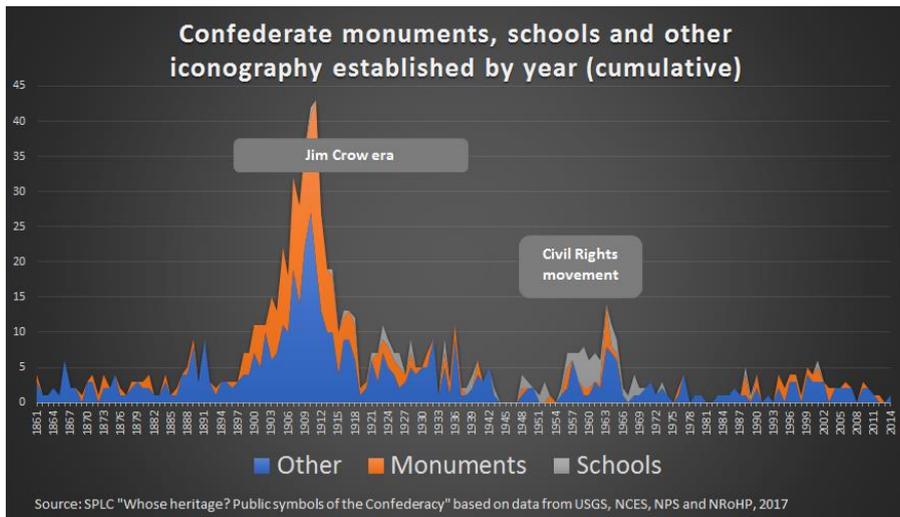

Figure 6: Confederate monuments, schools and other iconography established by year, 2017, Creative Commons[25]

the United States than the history of the Civil War.[26] By exploring the context of the monuments and the groups who supported them, we can understand the real crux of the controversy: not the preservation or removal of sources related to the US Civil War but rather a decision as to what to do with white supremacist interpretations of the past.

Making history more public develops a historical understanding of monuments among the public; in other words, an understanding of how their meanings have changed over time. In his book on memory and monuments in Berlin, Brian Ladd argues that 'how these structures [monuments and architectural relicts from the past] are seen, treated, and remembered sheds light on a collective identity that is more felt than articulated'.[27] The meaning of greatness, heroes and people worth remembering is not fixed and constantly changes.[28] In her book *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, Françoise Choay shows that the meaning behind monuments has changed over time, as has the consistency of their construction.[29] The reason for the spread of monuments in the West in the nineteenth century was their connection to the creation of nation states and national identities. This is evident in Britain with such monuments as Trafalgar Square, completed in 1840 to commemorate the British Naval victory during the Napoleonic Wars on 21 October 1805 (figure 3). Monuments encouraged social cohesion and expressed values such as patriotism, loyalty and duty.[30]

The heroisation of 'great men' – largely promoted in historical monuments, including the Confederate monuments – clashes with a more recent understanding of the role of monuments. Used for nation-building in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, monuments became more complex after the Second World War, moving from a pure celebration of the past to an invitation to reconsider our understanding of the past. James Young has called them counter-monuments. According to him, 'the result [of the postmodern shift] has been a metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of

the nineteenth century celebrating national ideals and triumphs to the antiheroic, often ironic and self-effacing conceptual installations marking the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth-century postmodernism.'[31] Young proposes to use the concept of counter-monuments for those that have moved away from heroic celebration. He argues that 'counter monuments are against the authoritarian propensity in all art that reduces viewers to passive spectators'.[32] The *Monument Against Fascism*, designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz in Hamburg in 1986 specifically to disappear over time and solicit the participation of viewers, ran counter to traditional monuments and memorials about the war and Nazism by encouraging people to investigate the past on their own, rather than being told specifically what to feel about the loss of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Instead of imposing a dominant celebratory representation of the past, counter-monuments have tended to question how different groups remember the same event. As Seth C. Bruggeman stresses, counter-monuments do so 'by insisting on the inclusion of people – and, sometimes, entire segments of American society – that have been persistently absented from public memory'.[33] The recent controversies over monuments partly reflect these opposing views on what monuments should do and represent: a heroisation of colonial military men or the inclusion of a diversity of voices and publics in questioning the past.

Past, Present and Contested Monuments

The Past in the Present

A recent text from the current President of the American Historical Association sparked heated remarks and criticism. In his column 'Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present', James

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Sweet criticised the connection between history and present-day demands and debates.[34] In wishing to go 'back' to a more traditional history disconnected from present-day debates – and criticising the validity of community-based research engagement –, Sweet revived an old debate in the historical discipline.

Academic history partly developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as opposing past and present. The rise of a professional discipline insisted on the fact that professional historians should detach themselves from the present to provide more objective analyses of the past. In the 1980s, David Lowenthal similarly argued that the past was a foreign country and that past and present-day values and representations should not be mixed.[35] Similarly, Peter Novick pointed to corporate uses of the past as a reason to disqualify public history. In his book on the noble dream of historiography, he defined public history as seeking 'to legitimize historical work designed for the purposes of particularist current constituencies'. Novick argued that most of what is labelled public history is in fact 'private history' that serves political agencies, private companies or organisations with particular agendas. This definition of public history contrasted with the 'noble dream' of what Novick presented as 'the universalist ethos of scholarship'.[36]

There is no doubt that the professionalisation of the historical discipline allowed for a more rigorous and methodological production of history. It is also very true that history can be used – and sometimes distorted – for many different purposes. The question remains as to whether historians should work as experts in surveillance, on the lookout for (in)appropriate uses of history, or whether they should also participate in and influence how history is used by individuals, groups, companies and institutions. In 1986 in her *Introduction to Public History*, Barbara Howe regretted that 'traditional historians have rarely confronted the issue of utility, they have dismissed it from their vocabulary as irrelevant or commercial'.[37] There are two long traditions of public history that

connect past and present. In the first tradition, history has been applied to present-day issues. Applied history refers to the multiple applications of history to present-day issues, questions, audiences, actors and policies. It is therefore often oriented towards problem-solving and is widely practised.[38] Applying their skills to present-day issues, historians can work as consultants for governments, agencies, cultural institutions and companies, creating and managing archives, managing historical sites or serving as expert witnesses in trials. Another tradition explores the public role of intellectuals in contemporary societies. Marc Bloch, a founding member of the Annales School of French social history wrote *Strange Defeat*, a book about the defeat of the French army, in 1940, bringing a historical perspective to the present.[39] The establishment of the *Institut d'histoire du Temps Présent* (Institute for the History of the Current Age) in France in 1978 and its focus on how the Second World War has been remembered and represented in France shows another example of how the relationship between past and present is more complex than a simple juxtaposition. Public history – and its focus on making history more public – embraces the way in which groups have interpreted the past as a relevant and needed part of the overall history-making process.

Contested Monuments: Why Them, Why Now?

As a reflection of group interpretations of the past in the public space, monuments are, by definition, contested. As such, they connect past and present. Some monuments have become more contested over the past few years and this was not the result from academic scholarship but from grassroot activism.[40] Public debates about preserving, removing or destroying monuments have taken place all over the world, but some specific examples (in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina, Chile, Belgium and South Africa, for instance) have led to heated controversies over national identity, colonialism, and slavery.[41]

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Context matters, and monuments can be contested for different reasons in different parts of the world. However, debates over monuments seem to focus on four main issues that relate to the constant reinterpretations of the past in the public space.

It is no coincidence that the countries where these debates took place have a colonial past. Many contested monuments represent and celebrate colonisation. Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, Christopher Columbus in Argentina, King Leopold II in Belgium and James Cook in Australia were actors of European expansion and directly took part in the building of empires. Edward Colston, whose statue was erected in Bristol (United Kingdom) in 1895 and dismantled in 2020, was a transatlantic slave trader in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This also connects with the Confederate monuments in the United States: all these monuments celebrate white men who either supported, contributed to, benefited from or designed colonial structures to enslave or preserve minorities (indigenous or not) in submissive positions. Today, the celebration of white colonial leaders clashes with the increasing diversity of voices and groups taking part in public debates. This directly connects with who is representing the national past in the public space and who can decide what and whom to commemorate.

Another common thread in public debates is the opposition between the heroisation and celebration of the past and the focus on the consequences of colonisation. Controversies emerged in Portugal about monuments erected under the Salazar dictatorial regime that celebrated Portugal's colonial past. These monuments portrayed a 'feel-good' national history that celebrated the state through its colonial empire while remaining silent about its impact and victims. Anti-racism activist Mamadou Ba explained 'I am very shocked by this schizophrenia (…) in which there are those who do not want to take responsibility for the villainies of the past, but who are very willing to praise the crimes or the protagonists of that past'.[42] This relates to the construction of counter-

monuments after the Second World War that aimed to challenge the heroisation and non-inclusive representations of the past.

Colonial monuments are criticised for focusing on the elites and leaders responsible for the colonisation and enslavement of populations while remaining silent about their long-term impact. What is at stake here is also the production of more inclusive representations of the national past that not simply celebrate colonisers. Amy Lonetree describes how, with regard to some monuments in California (United States), some indigenous communities are challenging 'the mythology surrounding the history of the California Mission System including the memorials and monuments that featured a very one-sided representation of this history'.[43] The colonial dimension is reflected not only in the representations themselves, but also in those who took part in – or in this case were excluded from – the building process. Controversies about monuments reveal both changing interpretations of the past and also a desire for more inclusive processes. While this push for inclusive discussions cannot change existing monuments, it can certainly affect the process of deciding what to do with contested structures.

Opportunities for Inclusive Public Histories of Monuments

Public history aims at developing more inclusive, collaborative decision-making frameworks – in which the victims of colonisation are represented – to determine what new monuments to erect and what monuments (not) to preserve. As Lucas Avelar stresses, one needs to discuss 'in which ways monuments, public spaces, cities, and places of memory (are) constantly reinventing and shaping our ideas of citizenship, rights, and social justice'.[44] The point is not to replace one dominant narrative with another but to foster co-production and more

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inclusive history-making processes for different social groups. Public history is not only history for people to consume; the idea is to help empower groups and individuals to contribute to the production of history. Groups are not voices, they are actors of the process. By adopting this approach, public history makes the whole history production process more public. This has resulted in some specific public history monument initiatives.

Decolonising Spaces as Public History Activism

Public history aims to make history more public by making it more accessible, engaging and participatory. When applied to monuments, public history helps design participatory frameworks to decide what to do – in both the short and the long term – with contested structures, especially those that support narrow, one-sided, colonial narratives. It is clear that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to deal with contested monuments. Each monument and each context are different. What is more, the history of the monument is not the sole dimension to consider; the process of removing monuments also has legal, cultural, political and also economic consequences, as well as the immediate impact on land use. What to preserve and what to destroy is a constant negotiation between different powers and groups and is not always linked to history and historians. Contexts matter, which is why Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town in South Africa was removed while his bust at the University of Oxford (United Kingdom) was not.

Several movements have emerged calling for cultural institutions (museums and archives), cultural practices or, in this case, monuments to be decolonised.[45] A common issue is to challenge the unilateral one-sided celebratory European-centric interpretations of the past. It calls for a decolonisation of national history and national structures. Decolonising monuments can mean fighting the silencing or

stereotypical representations of submissive victims of colonisation. Decolonising monuments does not mean reducing our historical understanding of the past; it is actually about increasing that understanding. Athabile Nonxuba, the aforementioned activist involved in the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign, explains that South Africans do not want to forget the colonial past or the society that erected the statue, but rather to contextualise that past society with their own in order to understand how they have changed over time and how their values have evolved.[46] Rather than destroying the statue and erasing history, South African activists called for it to be placed in context so that future generations could learn from it.

Removing Monuments to Make the Space More Public

Calls to decolonise the public space can take various forms that can result in more or less elaborate initiatives. Colonial representations can be challenged on the ground. In 1996, the Anishinabe sculpture in Ottawa (Canada) – a kneeling Anishinabe scout who was previously placed in front of settler Samuel de Champlain in a very submissive position – became the target of the Assembly of First Nations, 'who challenged the insulting character of the representation, not to speak of its historically incoherent costume'.[47] The protesters covered the statue with a blanket. Such short-term actions can lead to broader public debates. The Rhodes Must Fall protests in March 2015 began with local action when some students threw a bucket of excrement on the statue, leading to national debates.

Other monuments that celebrate settlers or active participants in colonisation have been removed by crowds or by official decisions. While this constitutes one possible solution to decolonise space, it is by no means the only response. Deciding what to do with contested monuments varies considerably depending on the monument itself, its

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representations and its history. Situations may be different and scholars should not be too hasty in proposing general statements. It is also legally and ethically impossible to speak on behalf of the communities affected and connected to the monuments, who should have a privileged role in the decision-making process. The point here is to explore how removing monuments relates to a broader historical understanding of the past in the public space.

Monuments have direct consequences on the public space. Removing monuments can contribute to decolonizing space. One option may be to move monuments from a political space – for example in front of the court of justice or the city hall – to a less central space. In 1948, the statue

Figure 7: Memento Park, Hungary, 2003, Creative Commons[48]

of Queen Victoria (a symbol of nineteenth-century British colonial power) was removed by the Irish authorities from the front of the Irish Parliament in Dublin, stored in a hospital and later sold and moved to Australia. Some other contested monuments have been moved to less public spaces. These monuments were kept but their impact on the political space was largely reduced.

A similar process was experienced at the end of the Cold War by countries formerly under the control of the Soviet Union. To some extent, the USSR was a colonial power and used statues of socialist leaders – Lenin and Stalin in particular – to colonise spaces. When they became independent, countries like Poland, Hungary, Ukraine and Romania therefore had to deal with and decide what to do with thousands of Soviet monuments. Many monuments were destroyed, while others were gathered and placed together. In Hungary, several monuments celebrating Soviet leaders were gathered and sent to Memento Park (figure 7). Far from the capital, the park challenges the political message and impact of these monuments. Monuments are disconnected from the political space and interpreted through guided tours and brochures.

The spaces where monuments are relocated can be questioned too, especially when colonial monuments are moved to a private space. On the one hand, the move challenges the public scope of the monument's narrative and denies any official support for a colonial interpretation of the past. For instance, the statue of Confederate General Mouton in Lafayette, Louisiana, was removed by the local authority from its central location. The statue is now at Camp Moore Confederate Cemetery in Kentwood.[49] Having been moved from a public to a more private space, the monument has lost its official dimension. However, it now belongs to and confirms a specific pro-Confederate interpretation of the past in which the long-term impact of slavery is not recognised. Removing monuments can remove specific colonial interpretations of the past without necessarily replacing them with a more complex or accessible

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Figure 8: Pioneer Monument, San Francisco 2017, Beyond My Ken, Creative Commons[50]

understanding. It is also interesting to discuss what to do with the spaces where those monuments formerly stood. How can they be used as interpretive spaces to enrich public history?

Removing monuments can create new spaces that foster a broader, longer-term historical understanding of the past, for instance by discussing and interpreting the legacy of colonialism up to the present day. Several indigenous communities have proposed reclaiming the spaces where colonial monuments once stood.[51] They have organised ceremonies that celebrate their survival, their histories and their counter-narratives for colonial monuments. In 2018, the statue of the Pioneer Monument in San Francisco (figure 8) – erected in 1894 to glorify the superior settlers and represent the 'uncivilised' native population in a very submissive position – was removed. The following year, several indigenous people met, curated the space and reclaimed their history. Some of them stood on the pedestal where the monument once was.[52]

April McGill, an American Indian of Yuki, Wappo, Little Lake Pomo and Wailaki descent, explains that removing statues celebrating colonisers is the start, not the solution.[53] Interpreting the past can lead to more social justice and repair the present. Some activists propose holding discussions about returning lands associated with colonial settlers to indigenous communities. McGill proposes giving indigenous communities a space, a park, a dance arena, a place to continue to hold their ceremonies. Process matters, not only representations. McGill's vision contrasts with native representatives in Australia who have argued for the replacement of statues celebrating colonisers with statues representing native populations. McGill disagrees and stresses that statues honouring individuals is more a 'white thing', not an indigenous tradition. Decolonising public understanding of the past also means challenging the structures used to remember so that they can become more inclusive of diversity of practice.

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Historicising Monuments That Have Been Removed

Other projects have aimed to historicise monuments that have been removed. Based on historical methodology, projects can contextualise monuments and provide a historical understanding of what they have meant at different time periods. It is also possible to provide additional sources – texts, objects, visual representations – that explore not only the events represented by the monument but also the history of the monument itself. One way to do this has been to move monuments to museums, interpretive centres and other cultural institutions. Although this is not possible for all contested monuments, it represents an opportunity for more public history. Museums offer a space where monuments' narratives can be controlled and interpreted. In 2015, the 3-meter-tall Confederate statue of Jefferson David was removed from the University of Texas at Austin's campus and installed in the university museum.[54] The museum designed a specific permanent exhibition entitled 'From Commemoration to Education' with historical sources like old letters, diary entries and original sketches that help interpret the statue.

The arts can also help museums to reinterpret colonial monuments. In its 'Monuments' exhibition planned for 2022 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the non-profit arts organisation LAXART intends to pair Confederate statues that have been removed 'with new works of art that will be created as a 'response' to the originals that were taken down'. The curators' aim is to 'put the Confederate monuments in a broader context' and to question 'the role they play in discussions about race, gender, censorship and American history'.[55] The curators and artists will explore not only the history of the Civil War but also how the event has been remembered differently by different groups and how public values have changed over time. In doing so, they will help

foster a broader and longer-term historical understanding of the colonial past.

As the 'reclaiming space' campaigns in the United States show, what to do with colonial monuments is one step in a long process of developing new historical narratives in the public space. In June 2021, a statue of Edward Colston that previously stood in the centre of Bristol (United Kingdom) and was toppled by protesters in 2020 was put on display in the M Shed museum. The museum asked visitors to complete a survey to explain what they think should happen to the statue. The comments were collected and included in a report by the We Are Bristol History Commission, a group set up by the Mayor of Bristol to 'build an improved shared understanding of the city's story'. The campaign provided some very interesting guidelines on participatory public history. The Commission included historians and experts in heritage, arts and culture who worked as facilitators of the discussions and organised the survey in a transparent way. Nearly 14,000 people completed the survey, 55% of them from Bristol. As some districts had a lower response rate, the organisers used outreach to provide more equitable representations for each area of the city. This mirrors the role of public history practitioners who, instead of simply disseminating their research, need to construct collaborative frameworks for history production in the public space.

The survey asked three questions: Do you agree or disagree that the Colston statue should be put on display in a museum in Bristol? What should be in the plinth space? How do you feel about the statue being pulled down? The results show that 74% of respondents wanted to put the statue in a Bristol museum and a majority (65%) were in favour of adding a plaque in the vicinity of the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020. Opinion was more mixed on what to do with the plinth, although the most popular option (49%) was that it should be used for temporary artworks or sculptures. Finally, 65% said they felt either very positive or positive about the statue being pulled down.[56]

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Inclusive public history has an important role to play in broadening discussions. Although the initial focus of the Commission was the future of the statue, it later turned its attention to issues including the history of slavery, the key roles of wars, the history of protest, the history of housing and migration, and other topics that connected the city to its past links with slavery. The whole process is laudable as it allows local communities to express their wish as to the future of the statue. The Commission concluded that 'We see the need to develop processes and practices, both locally and nationally, that encourage active engagement in creating more representative public space. When making decisions around contested heritage, public bodies should develop and follow processes that are fair and transparent, inclusive, participatory, evidence-based and committed to justice.'[57] But while the process supports many of the core values of public history – public accessibility, public communication, public involvement and transparency –, the level of public participation remained controlled. The process was somehow top-down – participants expressed views and the Commission wrote recommendations. Perhaps more puzzling is the absence of any local community representatives in the Commission itself and in the process to develop the framework. It seems that scholars are willing to collect and listen to public recommendations but that they want to preserve their authority in designing, interpreting and proposing further recommendations.

A public history of monuments should address the need to make the whole process of building, preserving and interpreting the past more public. It goes beyond the simple question of what to do with contested monuments and contributes to developing a broader and richer public understanding of the past. History matters and can help us understand what monuments are about and how they reflect specific interpretations of the past. Public history encourages us to consider monuments not only as representations but as belonging to broader processes of

interpretation of the past. The question is not only what to do with contested monuments but also who participates in the decision-making process. This forces trained historians to acknowledge that although they have expertise – through their research and methodology –, they should collaborate with other actors in public debates. Making history more public implies making frameworks and debates more inclusive. The role of historians is not to try to control the public debates but to facilitate inclusive processes of interpreting the past. Sharing authority might mean a loss of control for trained historians, but this is fine as long as the different publics engage and contribute to the history-making process. Public history can adopt an activist stance, not necessarily in supporting specific groups or interpretations but in challenging unilateral and one-sided dominant groups and narratives. For instance, in Manchester (United Kingdom), the City Council announced a review of 'public-realm art and a consultation exercise entitled 'Histories, Stories, Voices'' in collaboration with the Manchester Histories Festival to develop more inclusive discussions. Public history debates about monuments can lead to broader participatory frameworks to understand the local, regional or national pasts.

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