

Reparation for colonialism?

The long road to historical justice in Spain.

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For decades, racial and colonialist reparation has occupied a prominent place on the political agenda of anti-racist and decolonial movements, and demands and initiatives for a new transitional justice have multiplied throughout the Atlantic area. Without elaborating on the characteristics of these movements, it is clear that the pressure exerted by them has made possible one of their main objectives: that these demands form part of the political plans of the different states that have been called upon to adopt measures that address reparation. One example is the European Commission's resolution of 26 March 2019 on the "Fundamental Rights of People of African Descent", which recommends that member states take measures to make reparations for colonialism—heritage restitution, declassification of archives, increasing the visibility of people of African descent, and so on.¹ In this context, and taking the "African-American Redress Network" initiative² as a reference, EUROM and the NIOD-Institute of the Netherlands set out to map and analyse reparation initiatives in the Spanish and Dutch contexts. The experience was developed throughout 2021 and 2022 and we can now provide some results, while also launching questions that we hope to answer better in the coming years.

The Spanish and Dutch maps have forced us to open up debates that allow us to situate the singularity of reparation demands in Europe, distancing us from simplistic approaches that seek a homogenous transatlantic approach. Historical, socio-demographic or academic processes must be delimited and taken into account, without denying that reparation movements share an agenda or constitute a global movement. The main questions raised

¹ See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IP0239&from=ES>

² A project led by Columbia University (NY) and the Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center at Howard University, whose objective has been to map and promote reparations for individuals, families and groups who suffer or have suffered historical racial injustices in the US. See: <https://redressnetwork.org/>

were: (1) **Does a state-level map make sense?** Unlike the US, the consequences of Spain's slave-owning and colonial past materialise both internally and externally—with much greater weight outside its borders. For this reason, we consider that a project of these characteristics needs to triangulate the phenomenon and take a transnational approach that involves an area of action greater than that of the state itself. The fact that many of the victims and descendants of these crimes do not live or have not lived in Spain does not dilute its responsibility as a power, and for this reason this project must include all the responsibilities demanded from abroad and facilitate dialogue with the former colonies. However, the narratives and demands in each geographical context respond to their own history (colonisation, decolonisation...) and coordinates (social conflict, inequality...), and so, great effort, coordination and discussion must be added to the task of mapping so that these are dealt with adequately. (2) **How important are historical and socio-demographic differences in these movements?** Spain has also been a country of a colonialist nature. This is different from the case of the United States (which was a colony and then a state), and allows us to locate the socio-demographic contrast—also linked to the previous question, since the human flows (forced or otherwise) were located in the peripheries of the empire and not in its centre. This situation changed from the 1950s onwards, when migratory flows to the peninsula from the few African colonies began to increase, giving way to the first organised groups of African descent in the contemporary state. From the 1980s onwards, they were joined by new migratory processes of various kinds. Therefore, the political subject that leads these movements at the Spanish level is created through its own life experience, despite the obvious dialogue with Afro-descendant or native groups from all over the world and their connections. This contextualisation has also forced us to establish our own reference chronologies. (3) **Who is the holder of reparation rights?** The adaptation of the Afro-descendant category operative in the case of the USA is complex for the Spanish case due to the geographical diversity of its colonial and slavery processes. It is for this reason that we have dispensed with this category and taken into account the group of people and/or communities that have suffered processes of slavery, colonisation or discrimination that involve Spain in one way or another.



1. Withdrawal of the monument to Antonio Lopez. Barcelona 2018. (EUROM)

2. Protest in Barcelona demonstrating against the monument to Columbus and against racism, 2020. (EUROM)

The results and their key points.

In view of the debates that will accompany the analysis of the movements for the reparation of colonialism in Spain over the coming years, it is also necessary to explain what the demands of these movements are. Colonialism reparation includes numerous demands ranging from the symbolic (removal of statues, memory policies, etc.) to the economic (economic compensation, development plans, etc.) and the political (laws or heritage restitution). This diversity is another sign of the regional particularities of this global movement, as the emphasis on one demand or another varies according to the context. For example, for the Spanish case, six categories were established, with varying results—although they are still in the process of construction and therefore subject to modification.

Category	Number of initiatives
Legislative bills that include colonial and slave-owning historical memory, as well as formal petitions from third countries.	7
Removal/Request for removal/Resignification of monuments/ addition of new monuments/ restitution	9
Renaming of streets, squares and buildings/ institutes	6
Curricular adaptations and implementation of education plans that integrate matters concerning colonialism and racism.	4
Protest movements, entities and associations promoting visibility and advocating for reparations for Spanish colonialism, slave-owning and racism (hate crimes). In addition, movements, entities and associations promoting visibility and advocating for reparations for hate crimes and historical injustices in the present day.	2/19/24 ³
Exhibitions or other cultural awareness-raising initiatives	19

³ 2 protest movements; 19 organisations or associations; 27 hate crimes.

Once this first mapping has been carried out, the detailed results of which can be found in the report published in April 2022,⁴ it is interesting to provide some qualitative perspectives from the research.

The first is the scope, because if we directly assess the initiatives that respond to a direct request for reparation or restitution (excluding hate crimes), we can identify fifteen actions. Most of them concern the re-signification of public or heritage space or space in the legislative sphere. Of this amount, nine have concluded with the demands being totally or partially satisfied; six, on the other hand, have not been successful. However, what is really noteworthy in terms of scope are the few initiatives—not so much in comparison with the USA, but with the Netherlands. The second is territorial, especially because of the enormous geographical imbalance in the weight of specific reparation initiatives. However, this reality is modulated or minimised in some categories. In this sense, we see that Catalonia—and more specifically Barcelona—assumes an indisputable leading role in terms of the re-signification of public space. In fact, the first institution to make a public apology for the colonial issue was the Catalan Parliament. Likewise, we must also incorporate a chronological perspective into these trends. We place few initiatives before the arrival of the 21st century, although the impetus clearly came even later, specifically from 2016 onwards. Although it is difficult to clarify the absolute reasons for this increase, we dare to suggest some key explanations from this point of view: on the one hand, the influence of the push for reparations in the USA; and on the other hand, the rise in reparation initiatives in Africa and the Caribbean, and especially the creation of the CARICOM (Caribbean) Reparations Commission in 2013. The difference between these movements and those of the US is that their narrative orchestration places Europe and its powers at the centre of responsibility, a fact that for our study we must assess at a differential level and connect with the previous considerations that recommend a mapping based on a transnational dialogue. Finally, it is worth mentioning

⁴ See: <https://europeanmemories.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Redress-Network-2022-Spanish-Case.pdf> (written by Celeste Muñoz, Oriol Lopez, Sarai Martín, Marc Riu and Maria Pereira).

the relevance of the rise in decolonial movements in Europe driven by people of migrant or racialised origin. These movements have been in dialogue with the aforementioned phenomena and have incorporated into their practice the denunciation of the persistence of symbols and narratives of colonialism and slavery. Their action has been the main driving force behind this issue, putting reparations for colonialism on the political and social agenda.

Some reflections on the Spanish case.

Although it is too early to draw consistent and definitive conclusions, and although a second sampling phase is needed to complete the results, some more concrete interpretative key points can be considered on the status of the issue in Spain in relation to the management of colonial memory:

- The “law of historical memory”: reference to this law passed by the Congress of Deputies in 2007 is obligatory, not because of its contribution to the colonial issue, but because of its contribution to disavowal.⁵ This law, which establishes measures in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and dictatorship, does not once mention the word “Africa”; “colony”; “Guinea”; “Morocco”; or “Sahara”. The first law passed in Spain, more than 30 years after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, on the memory of its victims, forgot—or chose to forget—that Franco’s Spain had colonies in Africa that suffered the dictatorship as much as the Spaniards on the peninsula. The regime also had deep colonial roots. However, despite pointing out this missed opportunity, we believe that the colonial question deserves its own law of memory—something that has not yet been raised in any instance.

⁵ Although it is popularly known as the “law of historical memory”, its correct name is “Law recognising and extending rights and establishing measures in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence during the Civil War and the Dictatorship” (Law 52/2007, 26 December).

- Few reparation and recognition initiatives and colonial nostalgia: Spain has been one of the world’s major colonial powers in the modern era, the third most involved nation in the Atlantic slave trade and a minor colonial power in contemporary times. For this reason, one would expect to find in this context movements for reparation and remembrance similar to those found in the US, France and Britain. It would also be logical to find a political debate around demands, revision of school curricula, symbolism and recognition of responsibilities. But as the particularities of the “law of historical memory” already anticipate, the colonial issue is ignored, even when not claimed. There is an absence of memory to which nostalgic memories are added—an upsurge that can also be detected in the Dutch study, although reparation initiatives have been more numerous there, even with the emergence of an anti-colonialist political party. This comparison with what is happening in other European contexts is a task that needs to be further explored.
- The academy’s lack of attention to the colonial issue is reflected in the scarce presence of subjects such as African history in state universities—it is only compulsory in three history degrees. Nor are there any chairs or areas of colonial history or colonial studies. Likewise, colonialism barely features on school curricula in the compulsory stages. These elements must also be taken into account when analysing the absences, disavowals and lack of interest.

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