

## FOLLOWING THE FOOTPRINTS OF COLONIAL BARCELONA

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It is hardly unusual to find people, even highly educated people, who claim Catalonia can analyse colonialism with sufficient objectivity given that it has never taken part in any colonial campaign and never been colonialist. Even though most historians do not subscribe to this view, it is certainly a common belief among ordinary people. Dissociating ourselves from colonialism is obviously a way of whitewashing our history and collective conscience. But Barcelona, like it or not, is a city that owes a considerable amount of its growth to its colonial experience.

First, it is obvious that the whole of Europe was infected with colonial attitudes at the height of the colonial period, towards the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th. Colonial beliefs were shared among the English, French, Portuguese and Belgians, as well as the Swedes, Swiss, Italians, Germans and Catalans. Colonialist culture was constantly being consumed in Barcelona as in the rest of Europe. People were reading Jules Verne's and Emilio Salgari's novels, collecting money for the "poor coloured folk" at missions in China and Africa and raising their own children with the racist poems of Kipling. The film industry, that great propagator of colonial myths, inflamed passions in our city with *Tarzan*, *Beau Geste* and *The Four Feathers*. Barcelona's citizens certainly shared this belief in European superiority and in the white man's burden, with Parisians, Londoners and so many other Europeans. In fact, even the comic strip *El Capitán Trueno*, which was created by a communist Catalan, Víctor Mora, proved to be a perfect reflection of these colonial stereotypes.

### **Barcelona with Columbus and the *discoverers***

Glorifications of colonialism can be found in many of the city's nooks and crannies, even though people often fail to notice them despite them being under their very noses. The Columbus monument is an iconic site in the city: at the bottom of Les Rambles, right by the sea, etc. Even so, this is not the only a symbol of admiration for the colonisation of the Americas. Because Barcelona too was involved in colonising America, and its *discovery* and conquest remained very important in the city's collective imagination for a long time. Hence the large number of streets bearing names that recall the colonisation of America. First and foremost, Barcelona has a square called Plaça de la Hispanitat, in memory of the reactionary and neo-colonial theory of *hispanidad* or "Hispanicity" and a street named after the inventor of that term, the far-right activist Ramiro de Maeztu.

There are streets named after not just each of Columbus' ships: Caravel·la La Pinta, Caravel·la La Niña and Nau Santa Maria but also lieutenants to Admiral Columbus, the Pinzón brothers. Some fifteen streets pay Barcelona's tribute to the conquerors of America. Each has a street named after him: Pedro de Alvarado, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Elcano, Magalhães, Fra Juníper Serra, Pedro de Mendoza, Hernán Cortés, Pizarro, Juan de Garay, Alfonso de Ojeda, Francisco de Orellana, Ponce de León, Gaspar de Portolà, Jiménez de Quesada. And one of the few Catalans involved in this event, Manuel d'Amat i de Junyent, the Viceroy of Peru and a central figure serving in wars in Africa, merited a triple memorial: Plaça del Virrei Amat, Plaça de la Virreina (after his wife) in Gràcia and the Palau de la Virreina located in the city centre.

## Colonialism nearer to home

But the expansionist campaign most commonly represented in location names in the city centre is not the Spanish campaign in the Americas but the Catalan-Aragonese campaign in the Mediterranean. A good number of streets in the Eixample were named in 1863, at the height of the Catalan Renaissance. At a time when a nation's prestige was deemed to come from its capacity for expansion, Catalans went out in search of their own glory in history. And this was epitomised in the Great Catalan Company. So, Barcelona began to fill its streets named after famous war leaders such as Roger de Llúria, Berenguer d'Entença, Roger de Flor and Bernat de Rocafort. Gradually, the aim became leaving a memorial, corner by corner, of all the territories that had been under the dominion of the Crown of Aragon at some time: Naples, Sardinia, Calabria, Neopatrás etc.

That era's desire to gloat over war victories reached its culmination in one of Barcelona's intended central squares, which was given the grandiloquent name of "Glòries Catalanes". Catalan historiography presented the Great Catalan Company as an example of Catalonia's overseas power, bringing considerable satisfaction to Barcelona's population. In actual fact, the Company could not be regarded as a national army but rather as a group of mercenaries or pirates acting purely out of a lust for money. And, while its hagiographers scarcely mention this, the Almogavars' expeditions went hand in hand with extreme violence against the populations of the eastern Mediterranean.

## The African War

Colonialism was at its most popular in Barcelona during the African War of 1859-1860, a small conflict that was used for consolidating Spanish ambitions to control the Kingdom of Morocco. The fact that hundreds of Catalan volunteers took part in the North-African conflict and that the neighbouring sultanate was quickly defeated helped to stir up great patriotic fever tainted with xenophobia and Islamophobia. Historian Josep Fontana, when referring to that period, speaks of a "popular, deeply racist operation to poison people's minds".

For months Barcelona experienced a huge wave of military and patriotic festivals where guest veterans invariably sported *barretinas*, the traditional Catalan hat. The city's kiosks and bookshops were inundated with patriotic propaganda publications; all of which were militaristic and Islamophobic etc. Composer Josep Anselm Clavé, much acclaimed in his day, composed a *rigodon belich* or war dance entitled *Los néts dels almogàvers* (*The Almogàvers' Grandchildren*), which took Islamophobia and warmongering to their extreme: "Off we go / And We'll learn / To stain our daggers / in African blood! "Let's go / And / We'll learn / To wash our hands / with African blood! (...) "We swear we'll exterminate / this race of slaves".

Clavé, whose fame rested on other works besides his *rigodon belich*, ended up having a street named after him and a monumental statue put up in his honour in Passeig de Sant Joan. Barcelona also named a street after Marià Fortuny, who depicted the *Battle of Tétouan* in a painting, exalting the Catalan volunteers' fighting: today it is one of the masterpieces on display at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and one of the key works of Catalan orientalism.

The city still bears several traces of that period's bellicose, patriotic and expansionist euphoria, for all the few advantages that victory brought Spain (some used to speak of a "*minor peace for a major war*"). First of all, there are numerous memorials in the city to General Prim, the main driving force behind the operation. Besides Plaça de Prim and Rambla

de Prim, there is also a large equestrian statue of the general in Parc de la Ciutadella, made from cannon iron. In 1936, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, it was in full revolutionary euphoria that the monument to Prim was destroyed by members of the Libertarian Youth, although it was rebuilt by the sculptor Frederic Marès during the Franco dictatorship.

But it is not just Prim who has places named after him in Barcelona. There are also streets named after each of his lieutenants, Major Victorià Sugranyes and Colonel Sanfeliu, both of whom died in the Moroccan campaign. The city has a street and square named after the great battles in that conflict: Los Castillejos and Tetuan; another to the conflict, a street in memory of the third battle, Wad-Ras, was re-named Doctor Trueta in 1992.

### **Barcelona and “Indians”**

The colonial experience that left the biggest mark in Barcelona was without a doubt that of the “Indians”, the business people who set themselves up in the metropolis after making a fortune in Cuba or Puerto Rico. These included Catalans as well as people from other parts of Spain who established themselves and did business here, such as Antonio López, the Marquis of Comillas, and slave-trader Pedro Blanco.

Many “Indians” displayed their wealth and clearly made their mark on the city. Many of Barcelona’s iconic buildings were built with money from Cuba, a large part of which had been acquired from sugar plantations worked by slave labour and by slave trafficking. Les Rambles would have been completely different had it not been for the investments made by the Indians who have built or renovated the large mansions along that avenue: the luxurious Palau Moja, the former headquarters of the General Tobacco Company of the Philippines, the Palau March etc. And, namely, the Palau Güell, which was funded by a family with a murky past. There is a monument to Joan Güell, the founder of the dynasty, on the Gran Via; it was destroyed in 1936, but rebuilt after the War.

The “Indians” left a strong mark on the lower part of Via Laietana, opposite the sea. Located nearby Pla de Palau is Plaça d’Antonio López, a square named after a marquis and slave-trader to whom a monument was also dedicated. Next to it is the Porxos d’en Xifré, a large building commissioned by Josep Xifré, who was also suspected of having worked as a slave trafficker. And, at the lower end of Via Laietana stands the Banc Hispano-Colonial building, a bank essentially created out of capital brought over from the Americas during the second half of the 19th century (some of which came from slave trafficking).

Another place where “Indians” had a strong presence was the Eixample. Barcelona’s urban development during the second half of the 19th century would not have been possible without capital hailing from the Americas, which enabled the construction of such spectacular buildings along Passeig de Gràcia and its surroundings. But the “Indian” presence was scattered throughout the city: in the El Congrés neighbourhood (in the zone know as “Els Indians”); in Mundet, where the Palau de les Heures stands; in the Temple del Tibidabo; in the Casa Elizalde; in La Maquinista Terrestre i Marítima etc. Barcelona's image would be very different today had it not been for its American contributions.

It is not surprising then, with all these Catalan economic interests in the colonies, that the two Cuban wars and decolonisations of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba would shake up Barcelona's society and left its mark on the names of the city’s streets and squares. Admiral Cervera, who headed the squadron defeated by the United States, has a street named after him. Another street bears the name of Laguna de Lanao, a place in the Philippines where Spanish forces heroically resisted the North Americans. And, following the loss of Spain’s

colonies, Barcelona named a street Carrer de les Filipines as well as a street and alley Les Carolines (after the small Micronesian islands that Spain sold to Germany after it had lost the Philippines).

### **The unfamiliar flaunted as an attraction**

It was towards the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th century that Barcelona allowed itself to be swept away with the same fervour that was holding sway over the English, French and Belgians for colonising Africa and Asia. It saw the arrival of the human zoos that usually covered the whole of Europe. In 1897, just after the Anglo-Ashanti wars, a group of 150 Ashantis were put on exhibition along the Ronda de la Universitat. Three years later and Tibidabo played host to a “presentation” of a group of Fulas from French Guinea. And it was during the Universal Exposition of 1929 that two further presentations were organised simultaneously: one was a group of Senegalese, at the amusement park, and the other a group Algerians at Plaça d’Espanya.

This was the time when a curious fictitious character was proving a triumph in Barcelona: Massagran, a creation of Josep Maria Folch i Torres. He would continue to triumph for decades, becoming a classic in Catalan children’s literature. *Les aventures extraordinàries d’en Massagran* [The extraordinary adventures of Massagran] is the story of a Catalan boy, Massagran, who lands up in Africa and settles among a tribe of *karpantes*, childish blacks he helps so they can govern themselves. This message with its coincidental colonial propaganda is no accident: Folch i Torres was also the author of an essay in praise of Spanish colonialism in Africa.

### **Our colonial war**

If there was one colonial war that made its decisive mark on the history of not just Barcelona but the whole of Spain, it would have to be the Moroccan campaigns (which lasted from 1909 to 1927). The Moroccan campaigns proved a disaster for Spanish society: a high number of deaths, a surge in social unrest, the army’s drift towards deeply anti-democratic positions and the establishment of colonial forces that would be decisive in Spain’s Civil War etc. The war experience in Morocco was really the original focus of Spain’s fascism, which had more influence on colonial military forces than on the tiny far-right political parties.

The Moroccan campaigns began with skirmishes around Melilla in 1909 and this had a direct impact on Barcelona. The revolt that broke out in Barcelona from the embarkation of troops to North Africa, known as Tragic Week, saw the destruction of 68 religious buildings now gone from Barcelona’s streets. And there are still streets and squares in Barcelona whose names bear testimony to those 18 years of North African campaigns; C/ Capità Arenas, C/ Comandant Benítez, C/ Tinent Flomesta, C/ González Tablas and C/ Taxdirt etc. The Spanish army, however, acted brutally to contain that revolt

Morocco would later rise up against the Spanish Republic; and it was the participation of Moroccan troops that proved decisive to Franco’s victory during the Civil War. When Franco consolidated his power, he wished to pay tribute to the North African troops that had helped him, whom he honoured by naming some of Barcelona’s streets after Morocco, the Sahara, the Río de Oro and Tangiers. They still bear these names to this day.

## **“Our” Guinea**

Spanish Guinea was largely a Catalan colony. Once chocolate crops began to spread, around 1884, Catalan investors made their presence felt in elite *finqueras* (chocolate plantations and exporters). They would gradually monopolise the top management of some of the big companies found in Guinea, such as the Transatlantic Company, ALENA and Frapejo. Catalans also played a key role in the colonial domination of Guinea's native population. As the Spanish government had no colonial schools and therefore lacked civil servants specialising in colonial work, it entrusted the transformation of native populations to missionary Claretian monks and Conceptualist nuns, a large number of whom were Catalans. Missionary work in Guinea was planned in Vic and Barcelona.

It was hardly surprising then, given this Catalan presence in the colony, that its great propagandists came from Barcelona, such as Juan Bravo Carbonell and the journalist Josep Vilaró, and that the Guinean-themed colonialist literature was dominated by Catalan authors in Spanish: Josep Maria Vilà, Liberata Masoliver and, above all, the tremendously racist Bartolomé Soler. Despite all that, Guinea, a small colony with a small population, is hardly represented among Barcelona's street names (merely a street named after Fernando Poo, another after the explorer Iradier and another after the geographer Beltrán i Rózpide, a propagandist for colonialism).

It was during these times of great economic exchanges between Catalonia and Guinea that Barcelona became second home to the elite, native bourgeoisie of the island of Fernando Poo. So, well-to-do Guinean families such as the Collins, Jones and Dougans established second residences in the Tres Torres neighbourhood. And when Guinea became independent and fell under the Macías' dictatorship, Barcelona automatically became a refuge for many Guineans; a somewhat inhospitable land that did not always welcome them with brotherly arms. Some suffered a great deal here: homesick, discriminated against and exploited. Others integrated fairly well.

## **A decolonised Barcelona**

Barcelona, which had been one of the main focuses of colonialism, was also one of the first places to raise questions over colonial culture. Back in the 1960s, Barcelona was the seat of publishing houses which, in an attempt to take on the dictatorship and review the world at the time, openly criticised colonialism.

A movement exalting colonial memories appeared in Spain towards the end of the 20th century, based on an active colonist movement. Barcelona played a notable role in this colonial nostalgia with the launching of the *Nuestra Guinea* webpage, continuous meetings of former residents and publications of colonists' memories. But while the colonists were rekindling their nostalgia, Barcelona was becoming, at the same time, the first centre to enter a deep discussion on Spain's colonial reality. Presentations of neo-colonial publications were balanced by the launch of the first movement to revise colonialism in the Spanish State. Students at the Centre for African Studies, the University of Barcelona, the Autonomous University and the University of Pompeu Fabra began to question sharply the African world under the Francoist dictatorship.

Barcelona may well have led the way in several respects when it came to questioning colonial myths, but in other respects it proved incapable of reconsidering mythical colonies. And such reconsideration would not be possible without a full acknowledgement of Catalan participation in the colonial realm.