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The Ghosts of the Nation: Ephemeral Activism and the Politics of Commemorations in Postcolonial Spain

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Abstract

This article examines how decolonial interventions can disrupt the temporal and epistemic regimes that produce and legitimise colonial heritage. Drawing on critical heritage studies, decolonial theory, and memory studies, it argues that current conflicts over monuments are not merely disputes about historical representation but struggles over temporal sovereignty. The argument is developed through two interconnected case studies in Madrid (Spain). First, it analyses the city's imperial memory complex focusing on the Monumento a la Hispanidad (Monument to Hispanicity) and the wider symbolic landscape surrounding the Museo de América (Americas Museum), where colonial and Francoist narratives continue to reinforce one another within the democratic urban fabric. Second, it examines the anonymous intervention carried out on 1 January 2023, when activists impaled a replica of Francisco Franco's head on the bayonet of the recently inaugurated Estatua del Legionario (Legionnaire Statue). Rather than demanding the monument's destruction, the intervention temporarily suspended its commemorative authority, exposing the colonial genealogies and fascist continuities embedded in Spain's official public heritage.

The analysis adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and comparative approach. It proposes that such political interventions should be understood as practices of temporal disruption that create fragile yet significant openings within hegemonic memory regimes. Although they cannot produce structural transformation on their own, these interventions expand the horizon of political imagination by reconnecting counter-memories of struggle and resistance that have been rendered invisible, forgotten, or disconnected. Their democratic potential lies in their capacity to broaden the field of resonances through which the past can be narrated, contested, and denaturalised. The article concludes that decolonising heritage requires moving beyond debates over preservation, removal, or resignification towards a critical engagement with the material, epistemic, and temporal structures through which colonial power continues to shape the present and, with it, the future.

Keywords

decolonial heritage, anti/counter monuments, ephemeral activism,
Spanish colonial memory, politics of commemorations

Os Fantasmas da Nação: Ativismo Efémero e Política das Comemorações na Espanha Pós-Colonial

Resumo

Este artigo analisa de que modo as intervenções decoloniais podem perturbar os regimes temporais e epistémicos que produzem e legitimam o património colonial. Com base nos estudos críticos do património, na teoria decolonial e nos estudos da memória, defende-se que

os conflitos atuais em torno dos monumentos não constituem meras disputas sobre a representação histórica, mas antes, lutas pela soberania temporal. O argumento desenvolve-se a partir de dois estudos de caso interligados, em Madrid (Espanha). Em primeiro lugar, analisa-se o complexo de memória imperial da cidade, com particular incidência no Monumento a la Hispanidad (Monumento à Hispanidade) e na paisagem simbólica mais ampla que envolve o Museo de América (Museu da América), onde as narrativas coloniais e franquistas continuam a reforçar-se mutuamente no tecido urbano democrático. Em segundo lugar, examina-se a intervenção anónima realizada a 1 de janeiro de 2023, quando ativistas empalaram uma réplica da cabeça de Francisco Franco na baioneta da recém-inaugurada Estatua del Legionario (Estátua do Legionário). Em vez de exigirem a destruição do monumento, a intervenção suspendeu temporariamente a sua autoridade comemorativa, expondo as genealogias coloniais e as continuidades fascistas inscritas no património público oficial de Espanha.

A análise adota uma abordagem qualitativa, interdisciplinar e comparativa. Propõe-se que estas intervenções políticas sejam entendidas como práticas de perturbação temporal, capazes de abrir brechas frágeis, mas significativas, nos regimes hegemónicos da memória. Embora não possam, por si só, produzir uma transformação estrutural, estas intervenções alargam o horizonte da imaginação política, ao restabelecerem ligações entre contramemórias de luta e resistência que foram invisibilizadas, esquecidas ou desligadas umas das outras. O seu potencial democrático reside na capacidade de ampliar o campo de ressonâncias através do qual o passado pode ser narrado, contestado e desnaturalizado. O artigo conclui que a descolonização do património exige ir além dos debates sobre preservação, remoção ou ressignificação, avançando para uma análise crítica das estruturas materiais, epistémicas e temporais através das quais o poder colonial continua a moldar o presente e, com ele, o futuro.

Palavras-chave

património decolonial, antimonumentos/contramonumentos, ativismo efémero, memória colonial espanhola, política das comemorações

1. The Blood and the Symbol

On 1 January 2023, an anonymous group of activists broke the ban: they placed a replica of the head of Spain's former dictator, Francisco Franco, on the tip of the bayonet held by the Estatua del Legionario (Legionnaire Statue) in Madrid (Spain; Figure 1 and Figure 2). The monument, located in front of the Headquarters of the Spanish Defence Staff, became the site of a profound act of epistemic subversion. It was an anti-racist, anti-fascist, and anti-colonial intervention that, for the first time, brought two foundational memory regimes of Madrid's urban landscape into the same material frame: Spanish colonial memory and Francoist public commemorations. This image marks the point of departure for the present article. It will also serve as its final image, but with a different gaze. With a different temporality.

Figure 1. *Statue of the Legionnaire*

Credits. Álvaro Minguito, 2023

Note. In the background: Headquarters of the Spanish Defence Staff.

Figure 2. *Replica of Franco's head*

Credits. Álvaro Minguito, 2023

Note. Replica provided by the artist Eugenio Merino.

Far from constituting a neutral or universally beneficial category, cultural heritage emerged historically alongside the formation of liberal modernity, the bourgeois nation-state, colonial expansion, and capitalist accumulation. As scholars such as Vergès (2024) and Táíwò (2022) have argued, heritage should be understood not simply as a cultural practice but as a political regime that organises memory through processes of inclusion and exclusion (and, as we know, there is not a single silence, but a hierarchy of silences). From this perspective, a decolonial approach to heritage must move beyond simply questioning or deconstructing dominant historical narratives. It must interrogate the material and epistemic structures through which preservation continues to reproduce colonial, racial, heteronormative, and extractivist relations of power. Within these broader processes of production and legitimation, this article focuses on

the intertwined dynamics of monumentalisation and de-monumentalisation in "public space" (a category that, given its liberal and modern roots, must also be deconstructed and historicised). Monumentalisation is not merely a commemorative practice but a spatial technology through which states materialise political authority. The production of heritage is thus inseparable from the production of urban space, involving processes of appropriation and domestication through which streets, parks, squares, and public institutions become sites for the performance and reproduction of specific political regimes. These processes have been further intensified under contemporary technofeudalism, in which heritage has become deeply entangled with processes of urban branding, tourism, financial speculation, and the commodification of culture and memory (Abad, 2025; Semi & Frisina, 2023). Disputes over monuments are therefore never merely symbolic. They also reflect struggles over value production, authority to define the place's historical meaning, and over who derives social, political, and economic benefit from their preservation.

Against this backdrop, the article is divided into two sections. The first examines Madrid as a space in which colonial and Francoist narratives remain deeply embedded in the urban landscape. Focusing on the Monumento a la Hispanidad (Monument to Hispanicity) and the broader symbolic environment surrounding the Museo de América (Americas Museum), it argues that the city contains what may be described as an imperial memory complex whose colonial dimensions have largely escaped sustained public scrutiny. The second section returns to the activist intervention that opens this article: the temporary transformation of the Legionnaire Statue in January 2023. Building on these two case studies, the article argues that contemporary struggles over heritage are, fundamentally, struggles over temporal sovereignty. This argument requires moving well beyond conflicts over symbolic representation, which continue to be articulated through debates about preservation, relocation, resignification, or even the legitimate destruction of heritage objects. At stake is not simply the meaning of monuments or cultural heritage, but the power to shape historical continuity itself and, with it, to imagine alternative futures and communities. To explore this proposition, this article therefore approaches heritage not as a stable inheritance to be safeguarded, but as an open, negotiated, and even contested field of encounters. This perspective invites us to conceive of heritage as a social practice capable of unsettling the temporal, colonial, and patriarchal assumptions on which its modern foundations have so often depended, while opening new possibilities not only for inhabiting the city, but also for inhabiting ourselves. Together, always together[1].

[1] Positionality statement: I am an Argentine historian. I am also an immigrant, and the son and grandson of immigrants. I arrived in Madrid in 2009 on a scholarship awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to pursue a Master's degree in Latin American Studies. Significantly, the official welcome meeting for the programme took place at the Americas Museum, at the entrance to which stands the Monument to Hispanicity. My position is therefore shaped by a series of intersecting and arguably contradictory identifications: Latino, White, immigrant, male, heterosexual, and, in many respects, privileged. Recognising this positionality is therefore not an exercise in self-disclosure for its own sake, but an acknowledgement that the critical gaze is itself embodied, as well as historically and materially situated.

2. Imperial Memory Complex

In contemporary Spain, debates about historical memory have largely centred on the legacy of the Civil War (1936–1939) and the ensuing Francoist dictatorship, which lasted until the dictator died in 1975 and the new Constitution was adopted in 1978. These debates have generated important social, legislative, and institutional initiatives, particularly at the local and regional levels, eventually culminating in nationwide legislation with the Historical Memory Law of December 28, 2007, and, more recently, the current Democratic Memory Law of October 19, 2022. Yet, colonial memory has remained comparatively marginal. Indeed, the current Democratic Memory Law does not make the slightest reference to Spain's colonial past or to colonial memory, while explicitly recognising other historically marginalised groups, including gender minorities as well as Roma communities. Put differently, how can the struggle against totalitarianism and the defence of democracy be conceived without even acknowledging the enduring effects of colonialism on the present, manifested through phenomena such as racism, xenophobia, and the material exclusion of ethnic and racialised minorities?

While Francoism has consistently become an object of public scrutiny, the colonial dimensions of Spanish national identity continue to occupy a far more ambiguous position. This is all the more striking when one considers that Spain's National Day is celebrated on 12 October, the date commemorating Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas in 1492. The holiday's successive official names reveal a remarkable continuity in the Spanish political imagination surrounding the conquest of the Americas. 12 October was officially designated Day of the Race from 1918 to 1958, Hispanicity Day until 1981, Spanish National Festivity and Hispanicity Day between 1981 and 1987, and, since then — under the Socialist government of Felipe González — simply National Day. Indeed, 12 October remains the longest-standing national commemoration in modern Spanish history. Spain has observed it continuously as its National Day since 1918, surviving every political rupture and form of government: liberal and conservative, secular and religious, monarchist and republican alike, including the Franco dictatorship and the constitutional regime established in 1978. All of them turned to Spain's history in the Americas as a strategy for ensuring internal cohesion and national legitimation — as though, once again, there were no other narratives, no other alternatives. Moreover, the celebration of 12 October invariably takes the form of a military parade, the country's largest held each year. What is celebrated is not a national holiday but conquest itself: an act of military domination and imperial imposition.

The asymmetry between dictatorship's counter-memories and those of Spain's colonial past is especially visible in Madrid. As the former capital of a global empire, the city contains a remarkable concentration of monuments, institutions, street names, and symbolic landscapes linked to colonial expansion. Unlike other European capitals — including Paris, Lisbon, Brussels, London, and Amsterdam — these elements have rarely occupied the centre of public controversy (Knudsen et al., 2022). Barcelona, however,

deserves separate consideration. There, the city's colonial and slave-trading past has become the subject of both institutional debate and sustained contestation by anti-racist and anti-colonial activists. However, this process is marked by significant tensions and contradictions (for the emblematic case of the Monument to the Marquis of Comillas, see Opazo-Sepúlveda, 2025). Returning to Madrid, it takes little more than reviewing the discourse of public authorities, reading the local press, or conducting a simple observational exercise by visiting any of its monuments or cultural heritage sites to realise how readily their presence is perceived as natural, historically self-evident, or even culturally innocuous, rather than as the material expression of colonial power[2].

The Arco de la Victoria (Arch of Victory) offers an especially revealing entry point into this phenomenon. Built between 1950 and 1956 to commemorate Franco's victory in the Civil War, the Arch of Victory stands on a main arterial road leading into the Spanish capital, in the Moncloa district (Figure 3). Its scale makes it hard to miss: standing 49 metres high, the Arch of Victory remains one of the city's most imposing monumental structures. Unlike comparable monuments such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the Arch of Victory was erected directly on the battlefield it commemorates, as the Battle of Ciudad Universitaria took place in this area of Madrid in November 1936. Today, thousands of workers, tourists, residents, and students — since the monument also marks one of the principal entrances to the Complutense University campus, Spain's largest university — pass beneath or around it every single day. Yet the monument's historical significance often appears strangely muted. Erected by a dictatorship to celebrate and glorify the Francoist regime, it nevertheless remains largely untouched and remarkably uncontested, save for a handful of isolated criticisms (Abad, 2022; González de Oleaga, 2016; Rodríguez-López, 2024). The Arch of Victory is visible — indeed, this is one of the defining characteristics of traditional monuments: they are almost impossible not to see — but it is not always legible. In other words, the monument has not disappeared from public view. Rather, it has become absorbed into the routines of everyday life.

[2] Beyond Barcelona, recent years have seen civil society initiatives seeking to make Spain's colonial and slave-trading past more publicly visible. In Madrid, anti-racist and anti-colonial organisations such as Conciencia Afro have developed urban walking tours highlighting the city's connections to the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people. A similar initiative emerged in Valencia in 2026, complementing longer-established routes in Seville. These initiatives remain largely grassroots and have yet to translate into broader institutional or heritage policies.

Figure 3. *Arch of Victory*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2025

The Arch of Victory is not an isolated presence. A short walk away stands the Americas Museum (Figure 4), inaugurated in 1941, during the early years of the Francoist dictatorship and housed in its current building since 1965. Situated on a hill in Madrid's Moncloa district, at 6 Catholic Kings Avenue, the museum occupies a strategic position within a broader symbolic landscape shaped by commemorative sites linked, directly or indirectly, to imperial nostalgia, Catholic nationalism, and projects of national regeneration. More than a museum devoted to the Americas, it functions as a spatial node within a wider narrative about Spain's historical mission in the world. In this respect, the museum's origins are inseparable from Francoist conceptions of "Hispanicity". Following the Civil War, the dictatorship sought to reconstruct Spain's internal cohesion and international legitimacy through an ideological reappropriation of empire. Deprived of almost all its overseas colonies — except Equatorial Guinea, which remained under Spanish rule until 1968, and Western Sahara, abandoned and handed over to Morocco in 1976 — Spain increasingly presented itself as the spiritual centre of a transnational Hispanic community united by language, religion, and culture. Within this framework, colonial conquest continued to be framed as a story of civilisational encounter, evangelisation, and cultural exchange rather than one of political, economic, epistemic, and linguistic domination[3].

[3] It is worth noting that the museum's current exhibition dates from 1994 and that, since November 2025, it has been undergoing an official process of "decolonisation", the outcome of which is not expected before August 2028. The initiative was promoted by the Minister of Culture, Ernest Urtasun, who, in January 2024, announced a process of "decolonisation" of Spain's national museums (Abad, 2025). See Americas Museum Renewal Project (Museo de América, n.d.).

Figure 4. *Americas Museum*
Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2025

The geography itself communicates hierarchy. The museum occupies an elevated position, both physically and symbolically, from which the Americas are observed, classified, and ultimately incorporated into a narrative centred on Spanish power and imperial greatness. This spatial arrangement reflects a broader logic extending well beyond the museum itself. The nearby Parque del Oeste (West Park), located below the museum and at the foot of the Arch of Victory, contains at least nine monuments dedicated to figures associated with the Latin American wars of independence, including Simón Bolívar, Bernardo O'Higgins and José de San Martín. At first glance, these statues might appear to signal recognition of anti-colonial struggles. Indeed, many were commissioned and financed by Latin American republics between the 1950s and the 1970s as a way of projecting their national achievements back onto the former imperial metropolis. Yet their location within the museum's symbolic orbit produces a far more ambiguous effect. Rather than challenging Spain's centrality by acknowledging the emancipatory significance of anti-colonial struggles, these monuments are subtly reabsorbed into a narrative that presents the former colonies as the honourable offspring of the "Motherland". After all, many of the independence heroes commemorated in the West Park were technically Spanish subjects and, in some cases, had even fought for the Spanish Crown in the Napoleonic wars before joining the independence movements. From its elevated position, the Americas Museum literally overlooks the independence heroes, as though the former empire still watched over its emancipated children (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *West Park, the Statue of General San Martín, and towering in the background, the Americas Museum*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2026

Since adopting the 1978 Constitution, Spain's successive democratic governments have largely preserved and in some respects reinforced the colonial and dictatorial spatial matrix inherited from the Franco regime. In Moncloa, a district historically shaped by its close association with the military, this symbolic landscape has never been fundamentally disrupted. Indeed, the failed *coup d'état* of 23 February 1981 was planned at the former Galaxia Café, located only a few hundred metres from the Americas Museum. Beyond the West Park and the Arch of Victory (Figure 6 and Figure 7), this landscape includes a series of additional buildings, monuments, and institutions, of which, for reasons of space, we mention only those most relevant to this paper (for a full list and description, see Abad, 2022; Cartografías Coloniales, n.d.; González de Oleaga, 2016).

Figure 6. *West Park, Arch of Victory, Monument to those Fallen for God and Spain (left), Obelisk to the Heroes of the Plus Ultra (centre-top), Model Prison (right)*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2026

Figure 7. *Map of the Imperial Memory Complex: A) Monument to Hispanicity; B) West Park; C) Victory Arch; D) Catholic Kings Avenue; E) Victory Arch Avenue (Memory Avenue); F) Christ the King Square; G) Cardenal Cisneros Square; H) School of Naval Engineering; I) Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe College; jJ) Rectorate of the Complutense University of Madrid; K) Air Force Headquarters; L) Obelisk to the Heroes of the Plus Ultra; M) Monument to those Fallen for God and Spain; N) Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID); O) Moncloa Lighthouse; P) Americas Museun; Q) Monument to Vasco Núñez de Balboa; R) Shrine of the Virgin of the Siege*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, using Google Maps, 2026

• The Monument to those Fallen for God and Spain, built between 1954 and 1965 as an explicit tribute to those who fought on the Francoist side during the Civil War. The building itself is lined with dozens of Christian crosses. Today, it houses the Moncloa-Aravaca District Council, constituting a striking reminder of the tensions between Spain's constitutionally non-confessional State and the enduring visibility of Catholic-Francoist symbolism.

• Christ the King Square and Cardenal Cisneros Square, the latter named after an influential promoter of Spain's early imperial expansion in the Americas.

• The Monument to Vasco Núñez de Balboa: Discoverer of the Pacific (1952), and the Shrine of the Virgin of the Siege, built in 1954 as a tribute to those who fell fighting for Francoist rebel forces during the Civil War.

• The Obelisk to the Heroes of the Plus Ultra, erected in 1951. The monument commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first transatlantic flight linking Spain and the Americas, completed in 1926. Its symbolism unmistakably evokes imperial expansion and the heroic age of the "discovery" of the Americas. Where caravels had once crossed the Atlantic, modern aircraft now conquered the skies.

• The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), housed in the Hispanicity Palace. The Agency originated as the Council of Hispanicity (1940–1945), before becoming the Institute of Hispanic Culture (1945–1977), the Ibero-American Centre for Cooperation (1977–1979), the Ibero-American Cooperation Institute (1979–1988), and the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (1988–2007). In other

words, the discourse shifted from conquest to development cooperation, while Spain's colonial tradition continued to function as a key instrument of international projection. At the entrance to AECID stands a large bronze caravel bearing the following inscription: "the peoples of Hispanic America and the Philippines to Isabella the Catholic, Queen of Spain, Mother of America, Founder of Peoples, whose visionary impulse completed the geographical and spiritual unity of the world. They dedicate this filial and enduring tribute on the fifth centenary of her birth (1451–1951)". The maternal and foundational imagery could hardly be more explicit.

Yet this is not the whole story: Spain's successive democratic governments reinforced the imperial and Francoist legacy embedded in Madrid's urban landscape. In 1990, Madrid City Council commissioned the architect Salvador Pérez Arroyo to design a major communications tower. The official justification was twofold: to commemorate the quincentenary of the so-called "discovery" of the Americas (1492–1992) and to celebrate Madrid's forthcoming designation as European Capital of Culture (1992). Seville was preparing to host the Universal Exposition (1992), while Barcelona was about to stage its first Olympic Games (1992). Madrid, the former imperial capital, would receive a newly renovated Americas Museum — reopened in 1994 — and, almost at its gateway, what would become known as the Faro de la Moncloa (Moncloa Lighthouse; Figure 8). The tower's official slogan reads: "Moncloa Lighthouse: panoramic views from 92 metres above the city". The irony, however, is difficult to miss. Madrid has no sea, yet it has a lighthouse. And what do lighthouses do? First, they illuminate the West Park, where statues of Latin American independence leaders are displayed. More than two centuries after independence, Spain continues, at least symbolically, to illuminate its former colonies. Second, lighthouses are designed both to look and to be seen. Third, they guide and protect. The lighthouse watches over the Americas Museum and, above all, over Spain's imperial legacy in the Americas (González de Oleaga, 2016).

Figure 8. *Moncloa Lighthouse*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2026

Finally, the Monument to Hispanicity (Figure 9) stands at the museum entrance. Its location is anything but incidental. Situated directly beneath the Moncloa Lighthouse, the monument seems almost watched over by it, reinforcing the protective symbolism that permeates the entire site. Designed by Agustín de la Herrán, the monument was erected for the 1970 celebration of the National Day. The following inscription accompanies the sculpture: "under the command of Generalísimo Francisco Franco, and while Don Juan Carlos de Borbón was Prince of Spain, this Monument to Hispanicity was erected in homage to God, the rock and trunk of our lineage".

Figure 9. *Monument to Hispanicity*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2026

The sculpture captures a moment in motion. It depicts a Spanish horseman, a gleaming cross emblazoned across his chest, reaching down from the saddle to lift an Indigenous woman onto his horse. She remains physically below him, with her body conveying vulnerability and subordination. The symbolic message is difficult to miss: the Spaniard appears as a vigorous, selfless hero. He masters nature — represented by the powerful stallion beneath him — but also rescues others from themselves. Under a remarkable semiotic economy, the monument suggests that Indigenous women were rescued from their own people and cultures. The Indigenous "Other" appears as savage, yet redeemable — otherwise, conquest itself would lose both its historical legitimacy and its moral purpose. Redemption is therefore presented as possible only through a heroic, paternal, and unmistakably masculine intervention, framed within the dominant heteronormative logic of colonial modernity. In this respect, the monument offers two important interpretative keys.

The first concerns miscegenation (*mestizaje*). Here, the relationship between Spain and the Americas is represented not as conquest or coercion but as a harmonious encounter culminating in mutual enrichment. The Indigenous woman does not appear to resist. Rather, she willingly entrusts herself to her rescuer. Such imagery resonates with longstanding narratives of miscegenation that have frequently been mobilised to soften or neutralise the violence of conquest, dispossession, and racial hierarchy. The Vasconcelos' (1925) ideal of the "cosmic race" is perhaps the best-known expression of this tradition, and it also informed many foundational national narratives of the newly independent Latin American republics. Yet miscegenation is analytically significant not because of its biological or even cultural outcomes — both of which have often served to legitimise the colonial enterprise — but because the very process of demographic and cultural mixture reveals the ambiguities, contradictions, and everyday negotiations of colonial rule (Gruzinski, 1999/2007). It is within households, fields, plantations, mines, and cities that Indigenous peoples, colonisers, enslaved Africans (mainly), maroons, and countless other actors negotiated the colonial order in their everyday lives. They did so through appropriation, accommodation, resistance, and subversion, while also producing new forms of knowledge, cultural exchange, and ambivalence. These everyday interactions expose the uneven, unstable, and constantly negotiated character of colonial power. In Bhabha's (1994/2004) terms, miscegenation may therefore be understood as an in-between space in which colonial authority is simultaneously reproduced, negotiated, and contested.

The second interpretative key concerns colonialism itself. The Monument to Hispanicity presents conquest as a gift rather than a system of domination — or even as a supposedly harmonious "encounter between cultures". Colonialism is represented as an altruistic project of salvation, one that implicitly demands gratitude rather than critical reflection (Abad, 2025). Within this symbolic framework, questioning the colonial enterprise becomes morally inappropriate because the coloniser appears not as an

instrument of a global system of conquest and exploitation, but as a benevolent benefactor. Read in relation to contemporary society, this narrative also carries wider political implications. Those positioned as newcomers, migrants, or subordinate subjects are implicitly expected to show gratitude by adapting to the dominant community's norms and values. Failure to do so risks exclusion, marginalisation, or symbolic erasure. The monument thus projects a paternalistic understanding of citizenship in which inclusion remains conditional upon acceptance of the hegemonic order rather than upon equality or civic reciprocity. Put differently, one is expected either to express gratitude or to remain silent, ultimately disappearing beneath the weight of the horse itself[4].

The spatial semantics surrounding the Monument to Hispanicity — from bombs to arches, altars, museums, and statues — belong overwhelmingly to the period before the 1978 Constitution, that is, to the Francoist dictatorship. Rather than reconfiguring or resignifying this symbolic landscape, the new democratic regime largely incorporated and reproduced it, particularly concerning colonial history. The question, once again, is "why has this landscape generated so little public controversy?". Well into the twenty-first century, Moncloa continues to function as what may be described as an imperial memory complex: a constellation of sites, narratives, and symbols that collectively reproduce a particular interpretation of Spain's colonial past and, by extension, of its national identity, historical origins, and sense of belonging. The concept of an "imperial memory complex" refers not to a coordinated political programme but to a palimpsest and cultural assemblage whose constituent elements need not communicate explicitly with one another to generate cumulative symbolic effects. Their power derives precisely from their apparent normality. Yet normalisation should not be mistaken for consensus, as demonstrated by the anti-racist and anti-colonial counter-demonstrations that take place every 12 October. Individual monuments may occasionally draw criticism, but the broader commemorative configuration remains largely unquestioned. In Madrid, colonial memory in public space rarely requires active defence because it is seldom perceived as threatened. In this respect, the analytical value of the concept of an "imperial memory complex" lies in its capacity to shift attention from individual monuments to the relationships between them, allowing us to understand how they resonate with, reinforce, and lend meaning to one another.

From this perspective, the question is not whether Madrid's urban landscape still bears traces of the colonial empire and the Francoist dictatorship. It clearly does. The more revealing issue is how these two historical formations intersect, reinforce one another, and remain mutually intelligible even when no explicit connection is made between them. Contemporary anti-colonial interventions should seek to disrupt this broader commemorative economy. This raises a final question: if colonial memory in

[4] In 2025, a small Palestinian flag was painted on the base of the monument. It is impossible to know whether those who carried out the act sought to frame it within the symbolic violence represented by the Monument to Hispanicity. The flag was swiftly removed by the municipal authorities, providing a telling indication of how the monument remains actively protected as part of Madrid's monumental heritage.

Spain's former imperial capital remains so deeply embedded in the urban fabric, how might it be effectively challenged? What forms of political, artistic, or social intervention are capable of disrupting narratives that have become naturalised through decades of performative repetition? One possible answer is to leave Moncloa and turn to another symbolic centre of the city: the Paseo de la Castellana. To this end, the following section examines an artistic intervention at the Statue of the Legionnaire, inaugurated in 2022. Modest and ephemeral though it may be, the intervention briefly opens a fissure in Madrid's imperial memory complex, rendering visible what has long appeared natural, almost as unquestionable as gravity itself.

3. Neofascism (Reloaded)

Let us return to the Legionnaire Statue (and, above all, to the artistic intervention that structures the present article). The statue, which does not form part of Moncloa's imperial memory complex, was inaugurated on November 8, 2022, by Madrid's mayor, José Luis Martínez-Almeida, a member of the conservative People's Party. The inauguration coincided with the 87th anniversary of the fascist assault on Madrid, launched in 1936 at the beginning of the Civil War. The activist, by contrast, deliberately chose 1 January for their intervention, marking the anniversary of the death of José Millán-Astray, founder of the Spanish Legion, who died in 1954. During the inauguration ceremony, they openly celebrated Millán-Astray — with songs, symbols and political chants — and Francoist flags were displayed among the audience. Neofascism in broad daylight.

Founded in 1920 as a colonial assault force, the Spanish Legion played a decisive role in Spain's military campaigns in North Africa, including the landing at Alhucemas in 1925. Millán-Astray subsequently placed the Legion at Franco's disposal, allowing it to become one of the principal military instruments of the Civil War and nearly four decades of violent dictatorship. On the morning of 1 January 2023, this historical continuity was condensed into a single image: Franco's head pierced by the weapon of one of his own legionaries.

The activists accompanied the intervention with a short statement, recorded and later distributed across social media: "there are no Democratic Memory Laws, no Hague Tribunal, no United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation that can force us to respect your dead". The statement was deliberately provocative. Rather than invoking legal legitimacy, it exposed what the activists understood as the persistence of colonial impunity within Spain's contemporary commemorative landscape. It is impossible to know with certainty how long the intervention lasted, how long Franco's head remained impaled on the Legionnaire's bayonet. It is also unknown whether the authorities removed it, though activists likely retrieved it themselves. The only certainty is that the intervention lasted only a few fleeting moments, perhaps no more than a matter of minutes. By the afternoon of 1 January 2023, the monument had already returned to its apparent normality. The names of those involved remain

unknown for security reasons. Their anonymity, however, only reinforced the gesture's collective character. Brief and humble, the intervention inaugurated what they described as the "primer monumento a las víctimas del colonialismo español"[5] (first monument to the victims of Spanish colonialism).

The intervention simultaneously operated as an anti-racist, anti-fascist, and anti-colonial action. The activists did not damage the monument. Its material structure remained intact. They sought not to attack the bronze itself but the symbolic regime through which the monument acquires authority. This distinction is crucial. Unlike many contemporary conflicts over monuments, the intervention neither demanded removal nor proposed replacement. It did not aspire to establish an alternative monumental order. Instead, it sought to interrupt, however briefly, the commemorative certainty through which the statue acted and functioned in public space.

In Benjamin's (1972/2001) well-known distinction, monuments can operate simultaneously as documents of civilisation and documents of barbarism. The activists attempted precisely such a displacement. Without materially altering the monument, they suspended its ability to function as a celebratory "artefact" while preserving it as a historical "document", as evidence of Spain's contemporary celebration of both fascism and colonialism. If only momentarily, the monument's commemorative function collapsed. Through irony, juxtaposition, and parody, the intervention exposed historical connections that official narratives continue to separate: the Legion's colonial origins, Spain's campaigns in North Africa, Franco's military project, and the persistence of imperial nostalgia within contemporary democratic Spain. More fundamentally, it also questioned the liberal, violent and heteronormative assumptions embedded in the very concepts of "heritage" and the resulting process of "heritagization", exposing the colonial epistemologies through which certain pasts become worthy of preservation while others remain politically invisible (Smith, 2006; Táíwò, 2022).

The intervention therefore invites us to reconsider anti-monumentality itself. Here, the challenge to monumentality did not emerge through constructing another monument but through an almost minimal gesture of evanescence. Its effectiveness lay precisely in its economy. The activists did not install explanatory plaques, organise a counter-exhibition, or demand the statue's immediate demolition. They introduced a single object into an already saturated visual field. Once again, Franco's impaled head radically altered the monument's legibility without altering the monument itself[6].

[5] The Legionnaire Statue was created by the sculptor Salvador Amaya, based on a design by Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau. The legionnaire stands 2.78 metres tall and wears the uniform of the 1920s. Mounted on a granite pedestal, the monument weighs 26 tonnes and rises to well over six metres in height. Franco's silicone head was donated by the artist Eugenio Merino, whose work Always Franco caused considerable controversy when it was exhibited at the ARCO International Contemporary Art Fair in 2012. The installation consisted of a life-sized replica of Franco's body lying inside a commercial soft-drinks refrigerator, as though it were a coffin. The head of this replica was then impaled on the bayonet of the Legionnaire Statue.

[6] In the fall of 2023, a small plaque of about 25 centimetres in size did appear at the base of the monument, denouncing not so much its colonial nature as its Francoist/fascist character. The plaque was unsigned, but it is suspected that it was installed by members of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. The plaque was removed by the authorities a few days later.

Equally significant was the intervention's anonymity. The activists deliberately refused any individual or collective visibility. In other words, we still don't know who performed the action. This anonymity should not be understood merely as a practical response to potential prosecution. It should also be read as a direct challenge to a constitutive assumption of modern and colonial epistemologies: the privileging of identifiable authors, heroic individuals, and founding figures (Barthes, 1957/1999). The intervention refused the logic of individual authorship that monuments themselves often celebrate. The question ceased to be "who performed the action" and became, instead, "who might recognise themselves within it". This shift also opens a broader political question: who bears responsibility for confronting colonial memory? Descendants of the colonised? Migrant communities? Anti-racist organisations? Historians and cultural institutions? Or citizens more generally (whatever that means)? The intervention reverses, in a sense, Spivak's (2003) famous question of whether the subaltern can speak. Here the issue is not simply whether historically marginalised subjects may speak — because they do speak and produce knowledge, whether or not we listen to them — but who is willing and entitled to challenge the hegemonic historical narrative itself.

The controversy surrounding the monument's installation illustrates this point. The monument was funded by the Army Museum Foundation through contributions from more than 700 donors (Ministerio de Defensa, 2021). The Foundation's Board of Trustees is chaired by the Minister of Defence, the Socialist Margarita Robles, who, despite being part of a left-wing progressive government, neither vetoed nor objected to the construction of the monument. The Foundation subsequently donated it to the Madrid City Council, which, without submitting the project to any advisory body, not even the Urban Landscape Quality Commission, decided to install it in front of a military building, the Headquarters of the Spanish Defence Staff, and only a few metres from another key piece of cultural heritage: the Monumento a la Constitución de 1978 (Monument to the 1978 Constitution), inaugurated on 27 December 1982.

The statue was neither put to a public vote nor debated in the City Council's plenary session. The monument therefore embodies a striking democratic paradox: a public celebration of Spain's colonial military past erected through remarkably limited democratic participation. In my view, this significantly undermines its democratic legitimacy and, ironically, may itself be read as reflecting the democratic deficit of those it commemorates: José Millán-Astray and the origins of the Spanish Legion. This paradox raises a broader question: how could a democratic State choose to celebrate colonialism — or, more precisely, the invasion and massacre of the Indigenous population of the Rif and North Africa — only weeks after adopting the Democratic Memory Law on 19 October 2022? More importantly, what forms of citizenship become imaginable when colonial violence continues to receive public recognition while its victims, their descendants, and those who have inherited their political struggles remain largely absent from official commemorative culture?

4. "Epic of Restoration"

The temporal scope returns to the scene. The Legionnaire Statue was not a relic inherited from a distant past. It was erected in 2022, after decades of democratic government, in a country that has also been part of the European Union since 1986. Its existence therefore cannot be explained as the passive survival of an older commemorative landscape created by either an empire or a dictatorship. Rather, it actively reaffirms particular understandings of fascism and colonialism in the present.

This distinction is crucial. Much scholarship on postcolonial cultural heritage has focused on monuments inherited from previous regimes (Knudsen et al., 2022; Semi & Frisina, 2023). The Legionnaire Statue forces us to confront a different phenomenon: the ongoing production of colonial memory under democratic conditions, or, more precisely, within an international context increasingly shaped by demands for decolonisation at both the material and symbolic levels. In this sense, the monument is not a residue. It is a contemporary political statement.

From this perspective, the statue can be understood through what Rufer and Varela-Huerta (2023) call an "epic of restoration" (p. 24). Such projects do not merely commemorate the past; they seek to restore a symbolic order perceived as threatened or lost. It is therefore no coincidence that monuments such as the Legionnaire Statue have been erected precisely when other Western national symbols have been questioned, removed, or critically reinterpreted (like the Monument to the Marquis of Comillas in Barcelona, see above). Their objective is less educational than restorative. They aim to recover certainties, hierarchies, and forms of belonging that contemporary decolonial agendas seem to destabilise.

The same logic can be observed in another recent monument promoted through public donations: the Monumento a los Héroes de Baler (Monument to the Heroes of Baler), also known as "los últimos de Filipinas" (the last men in the Philippines), inaugurated by Madrid City Council in 2019 in the central district of Chamberí (Figure 10). The monument is dedicated to the soldiers who continued resisting in the Philippines until 1899, months after Spain formally lost the war to an alliance of the United States and anti-colonial forces led primarily by Tagalog and Katipunan revolutionaries[7]. The statue commemorates an episode that occupies a distinctive place in Spain's national imagination. It marks neither conquest nor military victory. Instead, it celebrates endurance amid imperial collapse. And here lies another kind of paradox. Although the monument commemorates defeat rather than triumph, its narrative remains fundamentally imperial. What is celebrated is not the loss of the empire but the moral virtues attributed to those who defended it until the very end: discipline, sacrifice, glory and unwavering commitment to the nation. The conquest itself remains the unquestioned historical horizon that gives those virtues meaning. And this makes it especially adaptable to contemporary

[7] The Siege of Baler (1 July 1898–2 June 1899) was the 337-day siege of a Spanish military detachment by Filipino anti-colonial forces inside the church of the town of Baler, on the Philippine island of Luzon. In December 1898, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the war formally came to an end, and Spain ceded sovereignty over the Philippines to the United States.

forms of national nostalgia. Why? Because the monument transforms imperial defeat into moral victory, allowing colonial memory to survive through the heroic representation of those who, in their own way, refused to acknowledge the end of empire.

Figure 10. *Monument to the Heroes of Baler*

Credits. Emiliano Abad, 2026

The Legionnaire Statue and the Monument to the Heroes of Baler should therefore not be understood simply as references to a national or military mythology. They also make particular futures imaginable by restoring selected historical repertoires: military discipline, sacrifice, masculine heroism, national endurance, loyalty and imperial attachment. As Rufer (2026) argues, the restorative epic presents itself as a complete heroic narrative that admits neither reinterpretation nor counter-argument. It is a closed discourse, convinced of its own revelatory power through the restoration of heroes, origins, and foundational myths. History appears settled. Heroes are reaffirmed. Doubt disappears.

The restorative logic also operates at an aesthetic level. Although erected in 2019 and 2022 respectively, both monuments deliberately reproduce the artistic conventions of late nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century public sculpture, drawing heavily on Renaissance-inspired aesthetics. Their figurative realism, monumental scale, and martial iconography suggest they belong to another historical period altogether. Their aesthetic vocabulary rejects the uncertainty and fragmentation that characterise much contemporary public art, opting instead for a visual language of permanence, authority, and historical continuity.

What is particularly striking about these monuments, however, is that they emerged within a much broader political sensibility: the resurgence of nationalist and far-right movements across the Western world. In this sense, they may also be understood through Rufer's (2026) complementary notion of a "poetics of anticipation". Anticipation does not refer to prediction in any deterministic sense. Rather, it describes cultural forms that make certain futures imaginable before they become fully articulated politically. The Legionnaire Statue and the Monument to the Heroes of Baler can be read in precisely this way. Their importance lies not only in what they commemorate, but also in the political horizon they help to anticipate: the growing normalisation of neo-imperialism and anti-immigration policies, exemplified by the emergence of "national priority" as a cornerstone of the political programmes of parties such as VOX and the People's Party, a principle that has, since April 2026, already been incorporated into regional public policy[8]. In other words, these monuments both reflect and contribute to the electoral and discursive consolidation of racism, xenophobia and the far right in contemporary Spain (... and beyond).

Yet if monuments can anticipate futures, so can acts of resistance, as the intervention on the Legionnaire Statue on 1 January 2023 (the so-called first monument to the victims of Spanish colonialism). By interrupting the monument's commemorative certainty, the activists briefly created a space where alternative futures became thinkable. Anticipation, however, should not be understood exclusively in optimistic terms. The future opened by such interventions remains contingent, fragile, and politically contested. For this reason, this kind of ephemeral activism should not be romanticised as an escape from material politics. Material infrastructures always condition their effects: the monument's location, the site's accessibility, the possibility of photographing and circulating an image, the presence of media platforms, and the unequal distribution of attention, legitimacy, and risk. Not everyone can intervene anonymously. Not every intervention will be received as political critique rather than dismissed as mere acts of criminal vandalism — which, under the authority of liberal law, strips them not only of social legitimacy but also of political force. Race, gender, class, and legal vulnerability continue to shape who can occupy public space, who is exposed to repression, and whose actions are granted public legitimacy. The politics of time related to anti- or counter monumentality does not exist outside structures of power. It unfolds within them.

5. Final Remarks (Opening a Rift in Time...)

"An absence of meaning opens a rift in time" (Certeau, 1975/1988, p. 213). This insight offers a particularly useful way to understand the political significance of the intervention on Madrid's Legionnaire Statue. The phrase should not be interpreted as

[8] "National priority" is a policy that grants preferential access to public services, including healthcare and housing, to "proper Spaniards" over racialized "immigrants". Although presented in institutional terms, the policy effectively constructs the category of "Spaniards" along cultural, religious, and linguistic lines, privileging those who are perceived as White, Western and Christian (El País, 2026).

announcing rupture in its strongest sense: a revolutionary break with existing structures or the disappearance of inherited inequalities. The intervention produced none of these outcomes. It did not redistribute resources, transform legal frameworks, or dismantle the institutional conditions through which colonial and authoritarian histories continue to shape contemporary Spain. Its effects were both more modest and more precise. It temporarily interrupted the monument's official script and temporal continuity.

This is the sense in which "the first monument to the victims of Spanish colonialism" opened a rift in time. For a brief moment, the material order of postcolonial Spain became visible precisely as such: as a political and epistemological order. By placing Franco's head on the tip of the bayonet held by the Legionnaire Statue, the activists reintroduced contingency into a commemorative landscape organised around permanence, much like the one embodied by the imperial memory complex at Moncloa. This temporal disruption is politically significant, but it should not be exaggerated. A rift can close, and in many respects it did (see "national priority" above). Public attention moves elsewhere, and institutions often absorb critique without fundamentally changing their practices. For this reason, the contemporary language of decolonisation carries an important risk. As Tuck and Yang (2012) have famously argued, decolonisation cannot become merely a metaphor. Liberal forms of institutional anti-racism may even appropriate the language of decolonisation in ways that neutralise its political force, redirecting attention from structural inequalities toward forms of symbolic recognition that leave existing relations of power largely untouched[9]. Yet the possibility of closure does not render the interruption meaningless. Political action does not become irrelevant simply because it is insufficient. The question is not whether an ephemeral intervention can produce structural transformation on its own — it cannot —, but whether it can alter the conditions under which such transformation becomes thinkable, and politically imaginable.

This distinction matters especially in relation to contemporary debates on colonial memory. Monuments such as the Legionnaire Statue continue to legitimise a broader historical imagination whose significance extends beyond the colonial past itself, encompassing migration policies and unequal access to housing, employment and education, as well as racialised forms of state violence repeatedly documented at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla. Indeed, on 24 June 2022, just four months before the inauguration of the Legionnaire Statue, the tragedy now commonly known as the Melilla Massacre took place. As people attempted to cross into Spain, they were met with a violent response from border security forces, leaving at least 23 people dead and more than 70 others missing (Peregil, 2022)[10]. The proximity of these events illustrates

[9] In this sense, the current "fashion" for decolonisation can be understood as a "trap" (Abad, 2025) or a "Trojan horse" (A. Salvioni, personal communication, June 17, 2026).

[10] The tragedy unfolded once again between 30 and 31 July 2026, when more than 70,000 people crossed the land and sea borders between Morocco and Ceuta, bypassing the formal procedure the formal procedures stipulated by the African country and the European Union. As of the date of writing, more than 90 bodies have been recovered from the sea (Viúdez & López-Fonseca, 2026).

how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary political realities. One reason these continuities remain so difficult to recognise is the relative absence of sustained public debate about Spanish colonialism and its relationship to contemporary racial, material and linguistic inequalities (Abad, 2022). As we know, this silence contributes to the normalisation of existing power relations, allowing racism to appear less as a historical product than as an unfortunate but ordinary feature of democratic life. This is why the street matters. Throughout the democratic period inaugurated by the Constitution of 1978, migrant, anti-racist, and decolonial organisations have repeatedly occupied public space, many of them choosing 12 October — the Spanish National Day — as a privileged site of political contestation[11]. These mobilisations are not new. Anti-colonial resistance can be traced back to the height of the imperial period. What is new is the growing need for anti-colonial memory to enter into direct dialogue with the democratisation of Francoist memory. And this does not simply mean adding colonial memory to existing struggles against dictatorship, as though both constituted separate historical agendas. Rather, the intervention suggests that anti-colonial and anti-Francoist memory are two inseparable dimensions of democratic memory itself. Our analysis of the Monument to Hispanicity and, more broadly, of the imperial memory complex surrounding Moncloa points in precisely this direction. Colonial narratives are not marginal to the national story: they constitute it. The fact that Spain's National Day continues to be celebrated on 12 October — and that the Legion remains one of the central protagonists of the military parade — illustrates how deeply colonial memory remains embedded in contemporary democratic rituals.

In this sense, decolonial memory is not primarily an additive project. It is not simply about recovering and just "adding" forgotten histories. Like feminist or queer historiography, its ambition must be more systematic: to question the material and epistemological frameworks through which historical knowledge itself has been organised. Decolonisation requires establishing connections where hegemonic narratives have imposed separation. It requires revealing relationships that official and hegemonic memories have rendered invisible. From this angle, anachronism is not necessarily an error but a critical strategy. It lets us connect histories that dominant narratives have insisted on treating as unrelated, as though any attempt to bring them together were methodologically unsound or historically absurd. The image of Franco's head impaled on the legionnaire's bayonet may be understood as one such act of reconnection. It brought anti-Francoist and anti-colonial memory into the same political frame, two fields that have too often been treated as separate domains. Both expose the persistence of profoundly undemocratic structures within a society that has long celebrated the success of the democratic transition (1975–1982) and Spain's subsequent

[11] The list of organisations engaged in anti-racist and anti-colonial activism is simply overwhelming. Since the 1990s alone, it is possible to trace the existence of more than 50 organisations operating across Spain, albeit almost always from marginalised or precarious positions.

incorporation into the European Union, while paying considerably less attention to the colonial legacies that helped make that transition possible. Going back to Certeau (1975/1988), it is precisely these acts of reconnection that, however modest, remain capable of reopening "a rift in time".

Leaving Franco's head impaled on a legionnaire's bayonet was not the first denunciation of colonialism, nor even the most creative or imaginative. It may, however, have been the first to speak explicitly in the name of something akin to Spanish society itself. In this respect, the ephemerality of "the first monument to the victims of Spanish colonialism" was not a weakness. It constituted part of its political logic. Because it disappeared so quickly, it resisted incorporation into heritage management routines or official commemoration. It could not easily be transformed into another object of institutional consensus. Instead, it remained an event: something that had to be remembered, narrated, discussed, and interpreted. This is precisely where Virno's (2003/2004) reflections on virtuosity intersect with González de Oleaga's (2013) work on narration and memory. If virtuosic political action leaves no autonomous work behind, its continuity depends upon the social practices through which it is remembered, retold, and reactivated. Its disappearance is not the end of the event but the condition of another form of political existence (Virno, 2003/2004). In this sense, González de Oleaga's (2013) reflections on oral transmission acquire particular significance:

> in the renewed beginning that accompanies every act of telling, the storyteller reshapes the narrative according to the needs of the moment, without seeking permanence, passing the baton on, without any universal or transcendent ambition. In orality, truth is of another kind: humble, small, contextual, and played out in the very event itself, in the instant of enunciation. It is the kind of truth that reveals to both teller and listener something that does not reside in the story's content but in its resonance. (p. 12)

The intervention on the Legionnaire Statue exemplifies precisely this form of political virtuosity. After all, democratic societies do not become more democratic simply by multiplying monuments or replacing one commemorative object with another. They become more democratic when they widen the field of resonances through which the past can be connected, narrated, and contested. And, above all, they become more democratic when those new connections open real possibilities for transforming the injustices and material conditions of the present. That's all.

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