



# The challenges around the remembrance of Atlantic trade and enslavement in Europe

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The need for a public remembrance of the Atlantic trade of enslaved African peoples and the system of colonial enslavement emerged in Europe in the late 20th century, through a questioning of traditional historical accounts, as well as an analysis of the condition of Black minorities within postcolonial societies.

Up until then, while the past was never absent from European countries, it was transmitted via a Eurocentric narrative through the prism of a civilizing glorification, based either on colonial expansion (Monument of the Great Discoveries in Lisbon, the Golden Age Monument in the Netherlands), or on the White abolitionist movement freeing enslaved peoples.

## A colonial or abolitionist Eurocentric narrative

In terms of port cities, the glorification of their maritime history, which had ensured their economic development, resulted in public tributes to local actors involved in the trade of enslaved peoples. These tributes often took the form of statues (Edward Colston in Bristol presented on his pedestal as “one of the most virtuous and wise sons of the city”) or inscribed in the urban landscape through street names, etc. (rue David Gradis in Bordeaux).

The second type of public remembrance, this time at a national level, carried an abolitionist narrative by celebrating the years of abolition (1807 in the United Kingdom for the trading in enslaved peoples, 1848 in France for enslavement), and its national heroes (monuments and commemorative plaques in honour of William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson in the 19th century; statues and street names for Victor Schoelcher in the West Indies from the 19th century and his entrance into the Panthéon in 1949; the statue of the Marquis de Sá da Bandeira erected in Lisbon in 1884). Despite all this, the trade of enslaved African peoples and enslavement, as well as the captives’ attempts at resistance (marronage or the Saint-Domingue revolution for example) were absent from this abolitionist memorial discourse.



A turning point came in the 1980s and 1990s with the re-examining of this past in several European countries (United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands) connected to issues relating to the social exclusion of Black minorities from the former colonies or overseas territories. The history of Europe's role in enslavement was thus publicly voiced through the denunciation of its postcolonial heritage, characterized by unequal relations between Whites and Blacks.

## The pioneering role of trading ports

Actions were first carried out by local collectives and associations in cities that had taken part in the Atlantic trade of enslaved African peoples: *Mémoire de l'Outre-Mer* (1989) and *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* (1991) in Nantes, or *Diverscités* (1998) in Bordeaux. They were led by Black activists from the French West Indies (Octave Cestor in Nantes), former colonies (Caribbean for the United Kingdom, Suriname for the Netherlands), as well as from Africa (Karfa Diallo in Bordeaux), and White activists (Yvon Chotard in Nantes). These movements were sometimes supported by engagé historians like Eric Scott Lynch in Liverpool and Madge Dresser in Bristol.

Following discussions with municipal authorities, these actions initially resulted in public narratives on the Atlantic trade of enslaved African peoples and the colonial system that took symbolic forms (official apologies from Liverpool City Council to the local Black community in 1999). They were also cultural, as in Nantes with the exhibition *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* (The Shackles of Memory) (1992-1994), or in Bristol with the creation in 1996, by the city council, of the Bristol Slave Trade Action Group, which went on to create the Slave Trade Trail and organize a 1999 exhibition on Bristol's role in the trade of enslaved peoples.

The transformation of the historical narratives of such cities became formalized in a permanent way in the years 2000-2010. For municipal authorities, the aim was to establish the attractive image of open modern cities, geared towards intercultural dialogue and the promotion of racial minorities. For example, the city of Liverpool inaugurated in 2007, for the Bicentenary of the abolition of enslavement, the International Slavery Museum; Nantes devoted two rooms to this part of its past in the museum of the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany the same year and inaugurated a Memorial to the abolition of enslavement in 2012. Meanwhile in 2009, the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux opened rooms dedicated to this history.

However, the city of Lisbon has taken only very recent steps to building a memorial on its quays in a tribute to the people enslaved by Portugal. This commitment comes in response to a request by an association of Afro-descendants, Djass, founded in 2016, to defend the rights of Portugal's Black populations.



## National policies since the 2000s

The commemorations of abolitions led some countries to modify their remembrance policies by detaching themselves from the abolitionist narrative in order to instead highlight the trade of enslaved peoples and the system of enslavement. These new national narratives were also combined with the fight against anti-Black racism and the promotion of cultural diversity within these countries. In the Netherlands for example, faced with the pressure of associations representing Black populations from the former colonies based on enslavement, mainly Suriname, the government created in 2002 a National Institute (NiNsee) to document the Dutch involvement in this practice and its legacies. A national monument was erected in 2002 in Amsterdam's Oosterpark, and exhibitions presented in the country's main museums (Enslavement in 2021 at the Rijksmuseum). A tourist trail was also created in Amsterdam in 2013 (Black Heritage Tour). This policy was accompanied by the establishment, in 2009, of a National Day of Remembrance (Ketikoti meaning "broken chains") every 1 July, the date of the abolition of enslavement in the Netherlands in 1863. Finally in December 2022, Mark Rutte's government presented an official apology to the descendants of enslaved persons for his country's participation in such activities and promised reparations.

In France, a law qualifying the Atlantic trade of enslaved African peoples and the system of enslavement as crimes against humanity was filed in December 1998 by the Black deputy of Guyana, Christiane Taubira, following a major campaign by various actors in both the country's overseas territories and in mainland France. This included the March of 23 May in Paris, just one of the events organized as part of this commemorative year (150th anniversary of the abolition of 1848). Passed on 10 May 2001, this law marked the beginning of a new memorial policy: the creation of a National Committee for the Remembrance of Enslavement in 2004; the inclusion of this history in school curricula; the establishment in 2006 of a national day of commemoration of the trade of enslaved peoples, enslavement, and their abolition (10 May); the inauguration of the Memorial Act in Guadeloupe in 2015, and the establishment in 2019 of a Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage.

Amongst the main European countries concerned by this past however, Portugal lags behind these developments, by continuing to privilege a civilizing humanist colonial narrative (Lusotropicalism).

The remembrance of colonial enslavement is also now supported by European institutions in the name of the struggle against anti-Black racism, presented as specifically and directly linked to this past. In its resolution of 20 March 2019 on "the fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe", the European Parliament defined "anti-Black racism" and invited its Member States to "recognize the history of people of African descent in Europe", in particular through the International



Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade on 25 March (inaugurated by the UN in 2007), and by means of reparations (public apologies or the restitution of objects stolen from their countries of origin).

## Towards a European decolonial movement?

The challenges surrounding the remembrance of the trade in enslaved African peoples and enslavement can be combined with the broader question of Europe's colonial heritage, thus questioning the racial foundations of its modernity. Since the 2010s, various actions in this field no longer only concern a demand for the integration of this history into urban spaces, the implementation of national commemorative days, its inclusion in school textbooks and museums, but also a movement away from a colonial narrative still present in the public space, considered contradictory with European values of freedom and equality, offensive for the descendants of enslaved peoples, and the vehicle of racial imaginaries which tend to legitimize discriminatory practices against Black populations.

In terms of the unfinished process of decolonization today, traces of the colonial enslavement or abolitionist narrative pose challenges to which the public authorities must respond. A review commission was thus created in Bordeaux comprising activists and academics who decided in 2018, not to rename the city's streets (a request from certain associations), but to place an explanatory plaque next to shipowners' names, and in 2019, to erect on the quays of the city a statue of the enslaved woman Modeste Testas, bought by two Bordeaux merchants in the late 18th century.

A movement to bring down statues symbolizing European colonialism, in particular those of Cecil Rhodes ("Rhodes must fall"), began in 2015 across student campuses in South Africa before spreading to the University of Oxford. These new transnational actions merged with the Black Lives Matter movement, launched in the US in 2013, to denounce both police violence against Black people, and the tribute to Confederate soldiers (statue of Robert E. Lee in Charleston, for example). This movement found a particular echo in Europe with the death of African American man George Floyd in May 2020, provoking demonstrations against institutional anti-Black racism across many European cities (Lisbon, Paris, Berlin, London, Amsterdam, Brussels). The traces of the colonial enslavement system in the public space, in particular statues, were then perceived as one of the manifestations of this institutional racism still in force. Actions were carried out in several European cities for several weeks targeting dozens of statues, many of which were linked to that very system. The statue of Colston in Bristol was thrown into the Avon River on 7 June and that of Colbert in Paris was graffitied on the 23, with the inscription "State Negrophobia".



This decolonial movement now concerns many cultural aspects of these European countries. In the Netherlands, for example, the traditional presence of “Zwarte Piet”, a Black figure accompanying Saint Nicolas offering gifts to children on 5 December, arouses debate and criticism every year from activists who see it as a legacy of enslavement and a message of anti-Black racism to the wider population.

In the late 20th century, starting in certain port cities that had once participated in the trade of enslaved African peoples, the question of Europe’s history and involvement in enslavement emerged, generating controversy, actions, and public policies at a local, national, and transnational scale.



## About the author

A researcher in contemporary history at the Centre d'histoire sociale des mondes contemporains (Université Paris 1) and editorial director of the Ehne at the Sorbonne Université, Sébastien Ledoux's work focuses on memory and remembrance, particularly from an institutional and/or cultural perspective. In addition to numerous articles, he published his PhD dissertation, *Le devoir de mémoire. Une formule et son histoire*, with CNRS Éditions (2016, re-edited in 2021), and *La nation en récit* (Belin, 2021). He oversaw the memorial project, entitled "Les lois mémorielles en Europe" (2020, *Parlement(s)*), and codirected "Le numérique comme environnement mémoriel" (*Mémoires en jeu*, 2021), "Quelle(s) mémoire(s) pour la guerre d'indépendance algérienne soixante ans après?" (*Mémoires en jeu*, 2022), and *Transmettre l'Europe à la jeunesse* (PUR, 2023).

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## Further information:

Colonies et esclavage: le temps des excuses?, Arte, 2023, link: [Colonies et esclavage : le temps des excuses ? - Info et société | ARTE](#)

Emmanuel Fureix, "[Déboulonnages et dévoilements: l'histoire en morceaux?](#)", *Écrire l'histoire*, 20-21 | 2021, p.229-232.

[Visiting Berlin's museum of disgraced monuments](#), France 24, 1 July 2020.



## Illustrations



National Monument denouncing enslavement in Oosterpark, Amsterdam inaugurated in 2002, Wikipedia.



Protestors pushing the statue of Edward Colston into the Avon River in Bristol, 7 June 2020, Ben Birchall / ap



Interior of the Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage, Nantes, credit: Nautilus Nantes/LVAN





Statue of Queen Victoria in Leeds (United Kingdom) with “BLM [Black Lives Matter] Slave owner!” written in graffiti, 10 June 2020 © Andrew McCaren/LNP/Shutterstock