

Memories in Dispute. Statues in Honour of Enslavers and Conquerors in Barcelona¹

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ABSTRACTS

Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts wurden in Barcelona drei verschiedene Statuen zu Ehren von drei Personen errichtet, die mit dem spanischen Kolonialismus zu tun haben: Antonio López (1884), Joan Güell (1888) und Christoph Kolumbus (1888). Die ersten beiden Personen waren zwei prominente Geschäftsleute aus der Stadt, die in Kuba reich geworden waren und die die koloniale Sklaverei verteidigten, während die Statue von Christoph Kolumbus anlässlich der Weltausstellung in Barcelona im Jahr 1888 eingeweiht wurde. Mehr als hundert Jahre später, zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts, wurden in der katalanischen Hauptstadt viele Stimmen laut, die die Entfernung des Christoph Kolumbus-Denkmal forderten. Eine weitere Initiative führte dazu, dass der Stadtrat 2018 die Statue von Antonio López entfernte. Andererseits wurden auch in Barcelona viele andere Stimmen laut, die den Standpunkt verteidigen, dass diese drei Statuen es verdienen, zum Zweck einer öffentlichen Debatte über die Erinnerungen an die koloniale Vergangenheit Kataloniens bestehen zu bleiben.

At the end of the nineteenth century, three different statues were erected in Barcelona in honour of three individuals related to Spanish colonialism: Antonio López (1884), Joan Güell (1888), and Christopher Columbus (1888). The first two individuals were two prominent businessmen from the city, who had become rich in Cuba and were defenders of colonial slavery. The statue of Christopher Columbus was inaugurated to coincide with the Universal Exposition held in Barcelona in 1888. More than a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many voices were raised in the Catalan capital calling for the removal of the monument dedicated to Christopher Columbus. Another initiative led to the City Council removing the statue of Antonio López in 2018. On the other hand, many other voices were raised, also in Barcelona,

1 This article is one of the outcomes of the Spanish research project PID2019-105204GB-I00.

to defend those three statues, claiming that they deserve to remain standing in order to open a public debate on the memories of the Catalan colonial past.

The objective of this article is twofold. Firstly, it will study the reasons that led to the erection of those three statues in Barcelona at the end of the nineteenth century, that is, the values associated with those three individuals. Secondly, it will also briefly analyse what reasons have been used recently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, by those in favour of maintaining or dismantling those three statues. In short, it is a question of analysing the policies of memory that, at one time or another, have been built around the colonial dimension of Barcelona.

In less than four years, between September 1884 and May 1888, three monumental complexes were erected in Barcelona, crowned by statues in honour of three individuals characterized by their enterprising nature. Two of these individuals had died shortly before in the Catalan capital itself (Joan Güell, in 1872, and Antonio López, in 1883), while the third, Christopher Columbus, had died a long time before, far from Barcelona, in 1506. These three individuals shared a common denominator in life: all three were connected with Spanish colonialism in America and with the world of colonial slavery. For this reason, there has recently been open questioning regarding the advisability of maintaining these three monumental complexes, erected in honour and memory of Güell, López, and Columbus respectively. In order to find out precisely what those three monumental complexes meant to their promoters, my aim in the following pages is to analyse the reasons and the agents who advocated at the time the erection of those three statues. In parallel, I will also analyse what reasons have been used recently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, by those in favour of maintaining or dismantling those three statues.

I would like to point out at the outset that two of the three statues, those erected in honour of López and Güell, were the result of the private initiative of a small group of members of the Catalan bourgeoisie who raised the necessary funds to finance their construction. The same private initiative was also fundamental in the financing of the costly monument dedicated to Columbus, which was supported by an agreement made by the Barcelona City Council. It was, in fact, the funds contributed and collected by private individuals that financed its construction. The first of these statues to be unveiled was the one erected in honour of the businessman Antonio López, the first marquis of Comillas. It was also the statue that was built in the shortest period of time, as barely a year and eight months passed between López's death (16 January 1883) and the unveiling of his statue (13 September 1884). Moreover, it is the only one of the three statues analysed that was removed from its pedestal and the one that has always generated the most controversy, practically since its unveiling. It is worthwhile, therefore, to speak first of López and the monument erected in his memory.

1. The Statue of Antonio López: A Monument in Honour of Entrepreneurship

Born poor in Comillas (Cantabria, Spain) in 1817, Antonio López y López left in his youth for Cuba, where he managed to accumulate a large fortune. He settled permanently in Barcelona in 1855, from where he invested the capital he had accumulated in Cuba to develop an intense business activity in various branches of the economy. He was the main partner in the shipping company Antonio López y Cía., founded in 1857 and later transformed in 1881 into Compañía Trasatlántica SA. That company soon became the main Spanish shipping company just at the time when steamships were overtaking, and displacing, the traditional sailing ships in merchant navies. López was also one of the promoters, and eventually the president, of a bank founded in Barcelona in 1863, the Crédito Mercantil. He also participated in several Spanish railway companies (being the vice president of the main railway company in the country: Caminos de Hierro del Norte de España) as well as in real estate companies, which participated in the urban development of the *ensanches* (urban widening) in Barcelona and Madrid. Finally, in 1876, López supported the creation of a large financial institution, the Banco Hispano Colonial, which was created precisely to finance the war that Spain was then fighting in Cuba, the so-called Ten Years' War. It was precisely this Banco Hispano Colonial that allowed him to consolidate the largest business holding company in the Spanish economy at the time, the Comillas holding company (or "Catalan group") – of which the creation of the first Spanish multinational firm, the Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas, also chaired by López, is worth mentioning.

There is no doubt that López was, in Barcelona, one of the most outstanding businessmen of his generation, a true self-made man, which helps to explain why the king of Spain made him the first marquis of Comillas (in 1878) and a grandee of Spain (in 1881). Moreover, during two successive summers, in 1881 and 1882, the Spanish king himself, King Alfonso XII, enjoyed his summer holidays hosted by López at his palace in Comillas. To conclude this brief summary of his career, I would like to point out that López was also the richest Catalan businessman of his generation, as I have explained in a recently published biography.²

López died suddenly in Barcelona on 16 January 1883. His funeral, held three days later, was a social event in keeping with his social relevance.³ It soon became known, moreover, that the pope of Rome had granted him a bull, suspiciously dated the day before his death, by which he was pardoned for all the sins he might have committed.⁴ Pope Leo XIII was thus grateful for the commitment made by López shortly before his death to generously finance the opening of a Pontifical Seminary at Comillas, run by the Society

2 M. Rodrigo y Alharilla, *Un hombre, mil negocios. La verdadera historia de Antonio López, marqués de Comillas*, Barcelona 2021.

3 *Diario de Barcelona*, 19 January 1883-afternoon, pp. 849–850. The articles and notes published by Spanish newspapers and magazines at the end of the nineteenth century were not signed by their authors. In our article we cannot, therefore, identify the authors of the references cited from the Spanish press of the time.

4 *Diario de Barcelona*, 24 January 1883, p. 1026.

of Jesus, that is, the forerunner of today's Universidad Pontificia de Comillas.⁵ With this prominent background, his main partners soon endorsed the initiative to erect in his honour a monumental complex that would serve as a memorial to the late businessman for successive generations.

Barely four months after his death, the machinery was set in motion for the construction of a monumental complex in Barcelona dedicated to honouring his memory. First of all, the plenary session of the City Council agreed to rename the former San Sebastián Square the new Antonio López y López Square.⁶ And in June 1883, the local press reported the following news: "During the Merced festivities [in September], the first stone will be laid for the monument that several private individuals of this city plan to erect to the memory of López, in the old San Sebastián Square". The same newspaper reiterated that the initiative was to be financed entirely by contributions from private individuals. It announced that "the most distinguished people of this capital belonging to commerce, banking, and industry" congratulated the City Council for renaming that square in honour of López and informed readers that "at their own expense [the private individuals], they would erect a monument at that point in order to perpetuate the memory of such a distinguished gentleman, presenting the project for approval in due time".⁷ The executive committee in charge of making the monument dedicated to the memory of López a reality was made up of only five individuals: the architect who designed the project (José O. Mestres Esplugas), the manager of one of the banks presided over by López (Policarpo Aleu Arandes), and three prominent members of the Barcelona bourgeoisie, who had shared various business initiatives with López: José Ferrer-Vidal Soler, Ramon Estruch Ferrer, and Manuel Girona Agrafel.⁸ The latter, Girona, served as chairman of the executive committee and as the face of the initiative.

Work progressed at a good pace, and on 6 September 1884, the bronze statue sculpted by Venancio Vallmitjana was placed on its pedestal, covered "with a national flag", thus culminating the construction of that monumental complex.⁹ The inauguration took place on 13 September 1884: the unveiling of the statue sculpted in honour of López marked the opening of the monumental complex, which its promoters donated to the city with a symbolic handing over of the keys. It was, however, a rather austere ceremony that ended with a brief speech by Claudio López, son of the late marquis of Comillas, in which he "thanked those present".¹⁰ Incidentally, *El Diluvio* reported in the newspaper *La Dinastía* that the monumental complex had cost its promoters a total of 165,000 pesetas (equivalent to 165,000 French francs).¹¹

5 La Ilustración Católica, 15 February 1883, pp. 8–9.

6 La Vanguardia, 23 Mai 1883, p. 3283.

7 La Vanguardia, 2 June 1883, p. 3537; La Vanguardia, 3 June 1883, p. 3549.

8 La Vanguardia, 18 July 1883, p. 4695.

9 La Vanguardia, 9 September 1884, p. 4.

10 La Publicidad, 14 September 1884, p. 2.

11 El Diluvio, 14 September 1884, p. 7469.

The construction of the statue erected to honour the memory of the businessman Antonio López highlights the private appropriation of public space to materialize an initiative agreed between a small group of businessmen. The economic power and influence of those partners and friends of the late López enabled them to raise the necessary funds and get the Barcelona City Council to take on an initiative it had not launched. In the same years, there was another similar initiative, also undertaken privately, to erect another statue in honour of another recently deceased businessman: Joan Güell. The lives of Güell and López have many points in common, and the two became in-laws after the marriage of their respective children, Eusebio Güell Bacigalupi and Isabel López Bru, which took place in 1871.

2. The Statue of Joan Güell: A Monument in Honour of Protectionism

The speed with which the statue in honour of López was erected contrasts with the delay in planning and, even more so, in materializing a statue in honour of Joan Güell i Ferrer. In fact, more than six years passed between the date of his death (29 November 1872) and the setting up of the committee created to “erect a monument to the eminent” the industrial entrepreneur “D. Juan Güell y Ferrer”. An executive committee began to function in February 1879, set up at the initiative of the business association Fomento de la Producción Española. Although formally the president of that committee was Pere Bosch Labrús, that is, the same person who held the same position in that promoting organization, he was replaced as acting president by the industrialist Jaime Fontrodona Vila. Francisco Taulina Garriga, as accountant; Enrique Batlló, as cashier; and José Pi Solanas, as secretary, were also members of that small committee.¹² It is worth noting the importance of the Cuban horizon among two of the four members. Its acting president, Jaime Fontrodona, had become rich in Matanzas before settling in Barcelona, from where he established a sugar refinery located near the Catalan capital. Jaime Fontrodona also had various economic interests in Cuba, which obliged him to travel frequently to the island. On the other hand, the cashier of that committee, Francisco Taulina Garriga, was the son of one of Barcelona’s shipowners and merchants, who had also made his fortune in Cuba, in his case in Havana. I am referring to Francisco Taulina Vilallonga, a good friend of the rich and influential Cuban businessman and slave trader Julián Zulueta Amondo. It should be noted, in this regard, that Güell himself was also a wealthy *indiano* in Cuba. And it was precisely the capital he had accumulated in Havana between 1818 and 1835 that had enabled him to become a dynamic textile industrialist in Catalonia. In addition to having participated in the founding of the Banco de Barcelona and other important industrial and agricultural companies in Catalonia (such as La Maquinista Terrestre y Marítima), Güell established in 1844 the so-called Vapor Vell (Old Steam), one of the largest cotton factories in Spain, located on the outskirts of Barcelona. A

12 La Publicidad, 10 December 1879, p. 1.

staunch defender of protectionist theories, he also developed a notable political career: he was a deputy of the Spanish parliament (1857–1858), a member of the Barcelona City Council (1862–1868), and a senator (1863–1868). Güell became, in fact, the most prominent spokesman and defender of protectionist economic doctrines in Catalonia and Spain, especially after the triumph of the Glorious Revolution in the autumn of 1868 until his death.

The first effective action that the Fomento de la Producción Nacional undertook to successfully honour Güell's memory was the placing of a portrait of him in the Municipal Gallery of Illustrious Catalans in Barcelona. On the day of its unveiling, 29 December 1879, a solemn ceremony took place in the most grand hall of the Barcelona city hall (the Saló de Cent), which consisted basically of an extensive review of the life of Güell. José Argullol Serra then read a laudatory biography of the life of the late Catalan industrialist, a biography that would later be published in booklet form for the knowledge and reading of later generations.¹³ I would like to point out that the monument erected in honour of Güell did not so much seek to commemorate his status as an *indiano* who became rich in Cuba in his role as an advocate (or champion) of a protectionist economic policy that was fiercely defended by Catalan industrialists. For this reason, when reporting on the process of building the statue, the Barcelona press spoke of a “protectionist monument” and defined Güell as a “deceased protectionist”.¹⁴ And also for that reason, the first tangible result of that committee was the publication of the so-called *Economic Writings* of the late Güell, that is, a voluminous book containing the numerous texts written by the Catalan businessman in defence of protectionist economic policy. The book was a set of writings “very elegantly printed”, which went on sale in June 1880 and was “published by the committee organized to erect a monument to the memory of the said economist”.¹⁵

Despite the aims of the business association Fomento de la Producción Española, fundraising to erect the statue was progressing very slowly. Five months after the subscription was opened, in July 1879, barely 2,067 dollars, or 10,335 pesetas (or French francs), had been collected. And a year and a half later, in January 1881, the amount collected had only reached 39,491 pesetas.¹⁶ For this reason, the promoters of the statue had to turn to the Catalans who lived far from Catalonia, for example in the United States, asking for their monetary contribution. They did this through an illustrated monthly magazine published in Catalan in New York called *La Lluanera*. Addressing Catalans living in

13 Biografía del Exmo. Sr. D. Juan Güell y Ferrer leída por D. José Argullol y Serra en el acto solemne celebrado en el Saló de Ciento de las casas consistoriales en 29 de diciembre de 1879 con motivo de la colocación del retrato en la Galería Municipal de Catalanes Ilustres, Barcelona 1881.

14 La Publicidad, 27 April 1879, p. 3; El Diluvio, 29 June 1882, p. 5521.

15 La Publicidad, 8 June 1880, p. 3; cfr. Juan Güell y Ferrer, *Escritos Económicos*, Barcelona, Imprenta Barcelonesa, 1880.

16 La Publicidad, 27 July 1879, p. 3; 16 January 1881, p. 2.

the United States, they presented the late Güell as an “ardent defender of the interests of Catalonia”, thus identifying Catalan patriotism with protectionism.¹⁷

At the end of 1881, a public exhibition of the marble that had been submitted for the construction of the planned statue was held in the Parc de la Ciutadella. Although there was a jury responsible for selecting the best marble, all Barcelona residents were able to view all submitted pieces.¹⁸ Little by little, the erection of the statue of Güell continued to progress. After May 1881, however, that initiative had to compete with another similar initiative: the construction of a monumental complex in honour of Columbus. And two years later, in 1883, the sudden death of López led, as we have seen, to his relatives also endorsing the construction of a statue in his honour in Barcelona. This triple coincidence undoubtedly caused an appreciable delay in the erection of the monument planned in memory of Güell.

Even so, on 2 July 1883, the architect in charge of the work, Juan Martorell Montells, reported that he already had the final plans and project for approval by the executive committee, promoted by the employers’ organization Fomento de la Producción Nacional. The committee stated that Martorell was to make the public presentation of his project weeks later, on 16 September 1883, in the historic building of the Lonja de Mar. In its rhetoric, the committee expressed its conviction that

the work [designed by the architect Martorell] will favour the arts, Barcelona, Catalonia, and the noble nation par excellence, and it will be the star that will guide the generous aspirations of our people who seek the regeneration of Spain.

The committee took the opportunity to remind the architect that, four and a half years after its establishment, they had still not managed to raise the necessary funds to erect the monument:

*The work, as you will see, is costly and beyond our current resources. It is costly, but we are 16,000 subscribers to this enterprise. We will therefore continue the subscription and we will reach 20,000 and if it is not enough, we will continue until its conclusion, sure of the support of the useful classes of Catalan society and sure of that of the other producing provinces of the Spanish nation.*¹⁹

It took more than four years before the monument in memory of Güell was inaugurated. This inauguration took place, as we shall see, just one day before the inauguration of the monumental complex erected in Barcelona in honour of Columbus. A coincidence that was by no means coincidental.

17 La Lluçanera (New York), January 1881, VI (1881) 69, p. 4.

18 La Publicidad, 21 December 1881, p. 2.

19 La Publicidad, 22 August 1883, p. 1.

3. Christopher Columbus

Where did the initiative to erect a monumental complex in Barcelona in honour of the Genoese admiral Christopher Columbus come from? Whose idea was it? And when was it proposed? The idea was the brainchild of the Catalan writer and journalist Antonio Fajas y Ferrer, who put it to the mayor of Barcelona in October 1852.²⁰ It is possible that Fajas developed his proposal during a visit to Genoa in the summer of 1851.²¹ Before launching that proposal, Fajas had lived for some time in Cuba, as had Güell and López. In Havana, he had been in contact with the great Catalan merchants living in the Cuban capital (for example, the wealthy Miguel Biada Buñol), many of whom had also returned to Barcelona after having become rich on the island.²² Although Fajas himself returned to Catalonia, he never abandoned his links with Cuba or, in general, with the American continent: he was, for example, a correspondent in Barcelona for some media outlets published in America, such as the newspaper *La Prensa* (Havana) or *La Llumanera* (New York). In Barcelona, Fajas became a contributor to various press outlets linked to the progressive party, such as *La Corona* (a continuation of *La Corona de Aragón*, founded in 1854 by Víctor Balaguer). Years later, Fajas ended up joining as an editor of *El Lloyd Español*, an “independent political, maritime, commercial, industrial, literary, and notices newspaper” in Barcelona. In July 1864, he even took over the editorship of this newspaper, which he himself characterized as “eminently mercantile”, aimed at satisfying “the curiosity of businessmen” and which, in political terms, he defined as being linked to the “party [...] of moral and material progress”.²³

In addition to his journalistic work, Fajas was also the author of several books and pamphlets, all published in Barcelona. I would like to highlight two of his monographs, both only a few pages long. One was the pamphlet published in 1861 under the title *Reseña de los festejos tributados a S. M. la reina doña Isabel II, en su visita a Barcelona en septiembre de 1860 precedidos de los que se dedicaron al valiente general Prim a su entrada triunfal en la misma* (Overview of the festivities held for HM Queen Isabella II, on her visit to Barcelona in September 1860 preceded by those dedicated to the valiant General Prim on his triumphal entry into the city). It was a compilation of the texts that Fajas himself had published in *La Prensa* in the autumn of 1860 for the greater glory of the Catalan progressive leader Juan Prim, the hero of the then recent war in Africa (1859–1860). The other pamphlet had been published a few months earlier, with an equally significant title: *Al valiente ejército español. Al glorioso return de'ls voluntaris catalans* (To the brave Spanish army: To the glorious return of the Catalan volunteers).

20 La Ilustración, 24 September 1882, p. 451.

21 La Publicidad, 6 December 1882, p. 2.

22 La Corona, 7 June 1858, p. 1: “but it is true that I heard from the lips of the late Miguel Biada, long before his return from the island of Cuba, in a lively conversation he had with some friends who are now part of the commerce of this square, in the café of the Lonja de La Habana, these words: I bet ten thousand pesos that within four years of my arrival in Spain we will go from Barcelona to Mataró on the railway that we will have built”.

23 El Lloyd Español, 1 July 1864, p. 1.

The first advocate of the Columbus statue was, undoubtedly, a journalist in the service of the progressive (liberal) party, who had known, in first person, the experience of emigration from Catalonia to Cuba and its subsequent return, from Cuba to Catalonia – a writer who would not hesitate to praise a neo-imperial war such as the aforementioned war in Africa.²⁴ However, that journalist did not manage to convince the Barcelona City Council of his proposal, and his proposal to erect a statue in honour of Columbus was kept in the drawer for more than 20 years. According to Ricard Vinyes, it was in December 1873 and within the framework of the first republic when the Barcelona City Council – at the initiative of the “mayor of the city [...], Miquel González i Sugranyes, a notorious abolitionist; leader of the Federal Republican Party, led by Pi y Margall; and also an active abolitionist” – first agreed to erect a monument in memory of the Genoese admiral. That initiative, however, did not go anywhere because the coup d'état of General Manuel Pavía, which put an end to the ephemeral republican experience a few days later, on 3 January 1874, prevented its materialization.²⁵ It was necessary to wait another year, exactly until 18 December 1874 for the plenary session of the “Barcelona City Council to accept my thoughts in such a satisfactory manner”, as Fajas himself wrote.²⁶ However, the “pronouncement of Sagunto”, that is, the coup d'état that General Arsenio Martínez Campos mounted a few days later, on 29 December 1874, caused a profound change in the composition of the Barcelona City Council and caused, in short, a new delay in the materialization of the monument in memory of Columbus in the Catalan capital.

It had to wait another six more years, until 20 May 1881, for the definitive starting signal to be given for the construction of the aforementioned monumental complex: on that day, “the committee appointed [ten days earlier] to erect a monument to the memory of Christopher Columbus” met for the first time.²⁷ At that time, the City Council was under the presidency of Francisco de P. Rius y Taulet, the same mayor who also promoted the Universal Exposition of 1888. In other words, the Columbus statue initiative and that of the Universal Exposition ended up developing in parallel, from 1881 until 1888. Explicitly recognizing his position as the intellectual author of the monument to Columbus, the City Council, presided over by Rius y Taulet, offered Fajas a seat on the committee created to advance its construction.²⁸ Soon Fajas himself began to sign his writings in the press as “the initiator” of that idea of that monumental complex.²⁹ However, the Catalan journalist and writer was unable to see his project come to fruition, as he died in Barcelona on 10 July 1883, five years before its inauguration. When reporting the death of Fajas, the Barcelona press also recognized him as the intellectual author (the

24 A. García, *Patria, plebe y política en la España isabelina: la guerra de África en Cataluña (1859–1860)*, in: E. Martín Corrales (ed.), *Marruecos y el colonialismo español (1859–1912): de la guerra de África a la penetración pacífica*, Barcelona 2002, pp. 13–78.

25 R. Vinyes, *Poder y conmemoración. El pasado como soberanía*, in: *Dominio Público*, 25 June 2020, cfr. <https://blogs.publico.es/dominiopublico/33630/poder-y-conmemoracion-el-pasado-como-soberania/>.

26 *La Publicidad*, 15 February 1882, p. 1.

27 *La Vanguardia*, 21 Mai 1881, p. 3.

28 *La Publicidad*, 15 February 1882, p. 1.

29 *La Publicidad*, 6 December 1882, p. 2.

“initiator”) of the monument to the Genoese navigator.³⁰ As a tribute to the late journalist, a tireless advocate for more than 30 years of that tribute to the Genoese navigator, practically all the members of the executive committee of the Columbus monument attended his funeral.³¹

It should be noted that during the first year, between May 1881 and May 1882, the monument project advanced very slowly. First of all, there was a first subscription closed to the public, in which both the City Council and the Provincial Council of Barcelona, as well as King Alfonso XII and the members of the executive committee of the Columbus monument, participated.³² In May 1882, almost 100,000 pesetas had already been collected. It was at this point when it was agreed to open the subscription to the public so that any individual or company could contribute more funds.

Main Funders of the Christopher Columbus Memorial

Barcelona City Council	50,000 pesetas
Antonio López y López, Marquis of Comillas	20,000 pesetas
Barcelona Provincial Council	10,000 pesetas
King Alfonso XII	5,000 pesetas
José María Serra Muñoz	5,000 pesetas
Tomás Ribalta Serra	2,500 pesetas
José Ferrer-Vidal Soler	1,000 pesetas
Sucursal of the Bank of Spain	1,000 pesetas
Casino Mercantil	1,000 pesetas
Havana City Council	500 pesetas
Francisco Gumá Ferran	500 pesetas
Francisco Taulina Garriga	500 pesetas
Eusebio Güell Bacigalupi	500 pesetas
Joaquín Gurri	500 pesetas
Camilo Fabra	500 pesetas
Others subscribers (39)	4,445 pesetas
Partial Subscription on 11 September 1882	102,945 pesetas

Source: *La Vanguardia*, 12 September 1882, pp. 5790–5791.

30 *El Eco de Barcelona*, 17 Mai 1883, p. 253; *La Publicidad*, 12 July 1883, p. 2.

31 *La Vanguardia-tarde*, 12 July 1883, p. 1.

32 In January 1882, a delegation of the executive committee visited King Alfonso XII in Madrid, who promised to inaugurate the monument when the time came. cfr. *La Vanguardia*, 22 January 1882, p. 507.

There were 20 individuals, by the way, who made up the executive committee of the Columbus monument: president, the mayor Francisco de P. Rius y Tauler; treasurer, the businessman Antonio López y López, first marquis of Comillas; secretary, the intellectual Carlos Pirozzini; and 17 other members (José María Serra Muñoz; José Canela Raventós; José Amell Bou; Francisco Taulina Garriga; Juan Martínez Illescas, marquis of Palmerola; Juan de Maza; Francisco Travila; Joaquín Gurri; Antonio Michel; Pere Bosch Labrús; Antonio Feliu y Codina; Pedro Casas; Vicente de Romero; Juan Coll y Pujol; Esteban Amengual; and Antonio Fajas y Ferrer). At least one of those individuals (Serra) were born in America (specifically in Chile) while five others (López, Canela, Amell, Taulina, and Fajas) had lived for a long time in Cuba before settling in Barcelona. The relative weight of the *indianos* was maintained in that committee beyond the death of some of its founding members. Soon after Canela, Serra, and López died and were immediately replaced by other wealthy businessmen from Barcelona. In September 1882, Canela was replaced by “the deputy elected by Matanzas, Don Francisco Gumá”, while Serra was replaced by “the senator of the kingdom and wealthy banker of this city, Don Evaristo Arnús”; moreover, in February 1883, “Claudio López Bru joined the committee to replace his father Don Antonio López y López”, recently deceased, as well as the Cuban Pedro de Sotolongo, manager of the Banco Hispano Colonial and of the Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas.³³

There is no doubt that the initiative to erect a monument in Barcelona in honour of Columbus had a marked Cuban accent. Moreover, among the first subscribers we find the Havana City Council, with 500 pesetas; the Cimarrones City Council (province of Matanzas), with 125 pesetas; and even some company domiciled in Cuba, such as the firm Panadero y Cía., with 250 pesetas. We also find the young Salvador Samá de Torrents, second marquis of Marianao, whose fortune came from two inheritances accumulated in Havana (Samá contributed 250 pesetas), and the very rich Tomás Ribalta Serra, owner of three sugar cane plantations in the central region of Cuba (the Santo Tomás, Santa Teresa, and Santa Marta sugar mills), who contributed 2,500 pesetas.

In order to know the meaning that its advocates gave to the statue in honour of the Genoese navigator, it is worth reading the appeal that the “Central Executive Commission of the monument to Christopher Columbus” issued to the “Barcelonians” on 23 September 1882, a few days before the first stone was laid. These promoters started from the fact that the first meeting between “the Catholic Monarchs” and Columbus, after his first trip to the New World, had taken place precisely in Barcelona. That coincidence was seen as the best sign of the union between Castile, “which with unshakable faith protected the projects of a man so often despised”, and Catalonia, “which with its blood and money taught the people abnegation and selflessness”. From there, it was a matter not only of “honouring the memory of the most illustrious navigator who sailed the seas” but also of

“commemorating the very important part that Catalonia took in the American enterprise” and, in general, in other equally expansionist enterprises in Asia or Africa:

It is high time that [...] modern nations should know when they set foot on the sacred soil of Catalonia, that the second capital of Spain was once the dominator of vast regions, the protector of great enterprises, and the mother of great men.

And the appeal culminated in an evocative statement: “Let us not forget that by honouring Columbus, Catalonia honours her favourite sons”,³⁴

According to their own words, for those men the vindication of the figure of Columbus had a clear imperialist component: Barcelona and Catalonia were proudly characterized as “dominator[s] of vast regions”. And those individuals also wanted to vindicate the historical work of the Catalan people – who, “with their blood and money taught the [subjugated?] peoples self-sacrifice and interest” – in dominating and civilizing other peoples in other territories. Although they did not say so explicitly, there is no doubt that they were referring to the mercantile empire that the Catalans built in the Mediterranean at the end of the Middle Ages, when they conquered and dominated Sardinia, Sicily, Naples, and the Greek duchies of Athens and Neopatria. Based on that idea, the laying of the first stone of the Columbus monument took place on 26 September 1882. It was a solemn act carried out “with great pomp and enthusiasm”, attended by many people from Barcelona, and closed with speeches by the mayor, the civil governor of the province, and the representative of the Síndico Podestà of Genoa.³⁵

In that solemn act, after having defined Barcelona as a “cultured city”, as a “great capital”, and as “the powerful centre of Spanish national work”, the civil governor of Barcelona, that is, the representative of the government of Spain, insisted in his speech that, with that monumental complex, the Catalan capital made visible its will to act, as it had done in the past, as the main node in the present link between Spain and Hispanic America. In his words:

*Praise, yes, to Barcelona, which knows how to associate itself with the great aspirations, with the ideas of greatness of the homeland, and if four centuries ago it had the joy of receiving the discoverer of the New World, it still deserves today, because of its important commercial relations with America, to be considered as the unbreakable bond that unites Spain with the peoples who speak the language of Cervantes in the new continent.*³⁶

The monument in honour of Columbus therefore not only looked at the past (of historical reparation) but also vindicated the present. After that multitudinous act, there was a luxurious dinner (“a splendid banquet”) in the historic Saló de Cent.³⁷

The pomp and pageantry, however, used in the laying of the first stone of the Columbus monument did not serve to encourage fundraising. In fact, the inhabitants of Barcelona

34 El Diluvio, 23 September 1882, pp. 8091–8092.

35 El Día, 28 September 1882, p. 3; La Unión, 28 September 1882, p. 2.

36 La Vanguardia, 27 September 1882, pp. 6116–6118.

37 La Vanguardia, 29 September, 1882, pp. 6167–6169.

did not seem to have shown much enthusiasm in financing that great project. When the first stone was laid in September 1882, the amount raised was barely 102,945 pesetas.³⁸ And five months later, in February 1883, the sum had risen to 120,000 pesetas.³⁹ Four months later, in June 1883, the amount raised had reached 140,401 pesetas, although half of the new funds (10,000 pesetas) had been contributed by a single company, the shipping firm *Compañía Trasatlántica SA* (whose president was the marquis of Comillas). Until then, the number of subscribers was very low, barely 280, including individuals as well as companies and institutions.⁴⁰ Five months later, in November 1883, the collection had risen slightly, barely 10,000 pesetas more, reaching a total of 150,000 pesetas. This lack of enthusiasm forced the executive committee of the Columbus monument to think of new ideas to finance the work. It was then when they agreed to hold “a lottery whose proceeds would be destined to the open subscription for the construction of the aforementioned monument”, which required the explicit permission of the Spanish Ministry of Finance. The committee also asked the government to exempt it from paying 25 per cent of the funds collected in the lottery – an ingenious idea to compensate for the lack of interest of the Barcelona residents in donating their funds for the monument.⁴¹ It was precisely that lack of citizen enthusiasm, expressed as a contribution of money that was both scarce and insufficient, that caused the construction of the monumental complex to be delayed much longer than expected. In October 1882, *La Vanguardia* reported that if the executive committee “is trying to carry out as quickly as possible” the construction of the Columbus monument, then, as lamented three and a half years later by the same newspaper, “it would be time for the aforementioned monument to be finished”.⁴² In January 1886, it was estimated that it was necessary to raise 400,000 pesetas more to finish the work. Then one of the members of the executive committee, the banker Evaristo Arnús, offered to “gradually advance the 80 thousand pesetas needed to finish the work, guaranteed by the City Council”.⁴³ The City Council took several months to respond, and the works had to come to a complete standstill.⁴⁴ It was not until June 1886 that a subcommittee was created to study the conditions proposed by Evaristo.⁴⁵ Finally, the solution adopted to obtain the remaining money was to raise it by means of bonds issued by a bank in the city: the *Sociedad de Crédito Mercantil*.⁴⁶ The president of that bank was Claudio López, second marquis of Comillas. Claudio López had also been a member of the executive committee of the Columbus monument since February 1883, replacing his father, the late Antonio López, whose statue had been unveiled, as we have seen, in September 1884. It was only thanks

38 El Diluvio, 02 Mai 1882, p. 3755.

39 La Vanguardia, 13 February 1883, p. 977.

40 La Vanguardia, 9 Mai 1883, p. 2963; 16 June 1883, p. 3889.

41 La Vanguardia, 9 November 1883, p. 7321; 11 November 1883, p. 7381.

42 La Vanguardia, 26 October 1882, p. 6791; 13 Mars 1886, p. 1644.

43 Crónica de Cataluña, 09 January 1886-afternoon, p. 1.

44 La Vanguardia, 17 August 1886, p. 5260; La Unión, 18 August 1886, p. 2.

45 La Ilustración, 6 June 1886, p. 292.

46 El Diluvio, 23 June 1887, p. 5101.

to those bonds, issued at the beginning of 1887, that the funds necessary to complete the work could be obtained. Thus, in August 1887, it was even possible to announce how the statue's unveiling ceremony was going to be.⁴⁷

The ceremonious inauguration of the monumental complex in memory of Columbus took place in the afternoon of 1 June 1888. The ceremony was presided over by the queen regent of Habsburg, Maria Christina, and was attended by her impuberal son, King Alfonso XII, who was barely two years old. The day before, on the morning of 30 May 1888, the

monument to Güell had been inaugurated on the Rambla de Catalunya, at the intersection with Gran Vía, attended by the City Council, the Provincial Council, the Fomento de la Producción Española, the Instituto del Fomento de la Producción Nacional, the Centro Industrial de Catalunya, the Board of Directors of the Asociación de Navieros, and representatives of several other corporations and workers' societies.

Speeches were given by the mayor of Barcelona, Rius y Taulet, and the president of the Spanish government, Práxedes M. Sagasta.⁴⁸ The coincidence between the two inaugurations of the statues of Güell and Columbus could seem to overshadow, somehow, the tribute to the first one, to the industrialist Joan Güell. In reality, it was not like that. The presence in Barcelona of the queen regent and her son, the future king, as well as the president of the Council of Ministers, Sagasta for visiting and inaugurating the Universal Exposition of Barcelona in 1888 allows us to better understand the thread of continuity between those three initiatives: the statue in honour of Güell, the monumental complex in honour of Columbus, and, finally, the Universal Exposition.

These three initiatives, whose inauguration coincided in time, in the spring of 1888, are the best symbolic example of the drive of a Catalan bourgeoisie, both commercial and industrial and proud of its past and its present, as well as its links with the American continent, in general, and with the island of Cuba, in particular. These three projects express the symbolic power of a bourgeoisie deeply connected, in times of the Restoration, with the Spanish national and colonial project. However, those values that the bourgeoisie of Barcelona wanted to extol with the monuments built in honour of Güell and Columbus and, even before, with the statue erected in memory of López have been subsequently questioned. The controversy surrounding those values has provoked a clearly iconoclastic questioning of the three statues. The first statue to be questioned was also the first to be built.

47 El Diluvio, 2 August 1887, pp. 6259–6260.

48 La Ilustración, 10 June 1888, p. 383.

4. A Controversial Statue

Just a year after the inauguration of the monumental complex of López, some Barcelona newspapers announced the publication of a book – which could only be bought directly from its author – entitled *La verdadera vida de Antonio López y López, por su cuñado Francisco Bru* (The true life of Antonio López y López by his brother-in-law Francisco Bru).⁴⁹ Francisco Bru had sent some copies of his book to some Barcelona media outlets. This is how, for example, *El Fusilis* reacted: “We have received by internal mail a book entitled: *La verdadera vida de Antonio López y López*. It has given us goose bumps. When we have space we will deal with this pamphlet that will occupy a lot of attention”.⁵⁰ Three weeks after that announcement, *La Publicidad* reported that “Don Francisco Bru, author of a certain recently published pamphlet, has been arrested and taken to the National Prisons”.⁵¹ The arrest and imprisonment was also reported by the newspaper *El Fusilis*, adding that they themselves had been summoned to testify before the judge by the lawyer, the veteran conservative lawyer and politician Manuel Durán y Bas, who represented Claudio López, second marquis of Comillas. Those responsible for that young republican newspaper were to testify before the court for having disseminated the publication of that book.

What was said in the book? What was so frightening to Antonio López’s son, Claudio López, that he tried and succeeded in having his own maternal uncle, Francisco Bru Lassús, imprisoned? Although many books were kidnapped and destroyed, some copies were saved from that process of destruction and have survived to the present day. In those books, we can read statements such as the following:

Do you want to know now the trade that the distinguished D. Antonio López did? He trafficked in human flesh; yes, my readers. He was a slave trader. López had an understanding with the slave captains, and upon the arrival of the ships, he bought the entire cargo, or most of it [...] He bought blacks in Santiago de Cuba at a low price and sent them to Havana and other points of the island where he sold them with more or less profit, but always with a very high profit.

And in another fragment, he added, “Santiago de Cuba had never seen a tougher, more hardened, fierce, and barbaric slave trader” than López; to conclude: “That square could rightly be called the Negreros’ Square because it will be the monumental rehabilitation and the radiant apotheosis of all the merchants of human flesh”.⁵²

Already in 1885, Francisco Bru proposed to change the original meaning of the statue and the square, which a year earlier had been renamed in honour of his brother-in-law, Antonio López. It was to be called, according to him, “the square of the slave traders”. It

49 El Diluvio, 11 September, p. 7314; La Publicidad, 12 September 1885, p. 1.

50 El Fusilis, 11 September 1885, p. 4.

51 La Publicidad, 1 October 1885, p. 3.

52 F. Bru Lassús, *La verdadera vida de Antonio López escrita por su cuñado Francisco Bru*, Barcelona 1885.

can be said, therefore, that practically since its inauguration, two ways of understanding the figure – the statue and the square of the Catalan businessman – coexisted in Barcelona: for some, López was a businessman who deserved to be remembered by future generations while; for others, López was a slave trader and his statue extolled all those who had participated in the slave trade.

That duality in the valuation of López (and of his statue and the square that bears his name) was maintained in successive years. Thus, a month after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, in August 1936, the republican newspaper *El Diluvio* asked the Barcelona City Council to demolish the statue of López, whom it defined as “the famous ebony flesh dealer, the great servant of the Alfonsine [Borbón] dynasty, [and] the sinister figure that best symbolizes the black hordes of fascism”. The author of that note, the journalist Antonio Avalos, asked in passing that they also demolish the statue of Güell, “also an Alfonsine and reactionary by all accounts”.⁵³ The City Council did not have time to debate this proposal because a day later a group of anarchist militiamen demolished the original bronze statue. The chronicle of *La Vanguardia* briefly reported the event under the title: “The monument to Antonio López y López, destroyed by the people”.⁵⁴ Those who tore down the statue of López did not want to tear down the statue of Güell, however, as the journalist of *El Diluvio* had also suggested.

Thus, for more than seven years, between August 1936 and January 1944, the pedestal of the Antonio López y López Square remained without any statue on it. The pro-Franco Barcelona City Council decided, however, to replace the sculpture in honour of the businessman, who died in 1883. The inauguration of that second statue took place exactly five years to the day when Franco’s army troops had militarily occupied the Catalan capital. Franco’s Spain wanted to put things in their place, also on a symbolic level. According to *La Vanguardia*, on 26 January 1944, the main authorities of the city admired

*the statue of the first marquis of Comillas, sculpted by the sculptor Marés. [...] The statue indicated is an exact reproduction of the one destroyed by the Reds, made of bronze, with the only difference that the current one is carved in white stone from Montjuich [sic].*⁵⁵

More than 50 years had to pass before new voices were raised, requesting the demolition of that second statue sculpted in honour of López. It was in 1999 when the leader of a Catalan left-wing political formation wrote an article in the press with the title “Barcelona does not deserve Antonio López’s square”. That author suggested “promoting a popular subscription to overthrow that monument, replace it with another one dedicated to diversity, and change the name of the square for another one; for example, Immigrant’s square”. Since then, there have been numerous pronouncements in favour of removing the statue as well as others in favour of keeping it in place. Among those in favour of removing the sculpture and changing the name of the square were various trade

53 *El Diluvio*, 23 August 1936, p. 2.

54 *La Vanguardia*, 25 August 1936, p. 6.

55 *La Vanguardia*, 27 January 1936, p. 15.

union organizations (CCOO, UGT, USOC) as well as various immigrant associations. Among those in favour of keeping the statue, we find the Merchant Marine Captains Association as well as different academics, press columnists, and direct descendants of López.⁵⁶ Finally, the municipal elections held on 24 May 2015 saw the victory of Barcelona en Comú, a political party that promised in its programme to “promote a complete revision of the gazetteer and the spaces of memory of the city to ensure that it is free of apologetic references to the memory of slavery, Francoism, and fascism”. In applying that electoral programme, on Sunday, 4 March 2018, the Barcelona City Council proceeded to remove the controversial statue to take it to a municipal warehouse. That was the first sculpture removed in all of Spain for being connected, of López in this case, with the slave trade and slavery. And it has also been the last, at least until today. The uniqueness of that withdrawal has led to several interesting analyses by Akiko Tsuchiya, Jordi Guixé, Núria Ricart, Mahdis Azamandi, Martín Rodrigo, and Ulrike Schmieder.⁵⁷

In the heat of the controversy unleashed in the twenty-first century, especially since 2014, around the statue of López, different voices have been raised in favour of also demolishing the statue of Güell and even the monument to Columbus.⁵⁸ Although it is not proven that the first, Güell, participated during his years in Cuba in the slave trade, some urban guides or tours of slavery in Barcelona state that he financed different expeditions of slave ships.⁵⁹ What is certain is that Güell was the first president of the *Círculo Hispano Ultramarino de Barcelona*, an entity created in 1871 as a real lobby that tried to prevent the Spanish government from abolishing slavery in its Antillean colonies, in Cuba and Puerto Rico. In that undertaking, he was accompanied by his father-in-law, Antonio López, who was the first vice president of the *Círculo Hispano Ultramarino de Barcelona*. Both López and Güell were, therefore, firm defenders of the institution of colonial slavery.

A good example of this obvious defense of colonial slavery in Puerto Rico and Cuba is offered by a letter that the *Círculo Hispano Ultramarino* of Barcelona sent to the president of the Spanish government, Manuel Ruiz Zorrilla, when the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico began to be debated. After asking “that the sect theories” (that is, those of the abolitionists) be silenced because it was “an eminently national question”, they affirmed:

56 Rodrigo, *Un hombre, mil negocios* pp. 9–29.

57 A. Tsuchiya, *Monuments and public memory: Antonio López y López, slavery and the Cuban-Catalan connection*, in: *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 41 (2019) 5, pp. 479–500; J. Guixé/N. Ricart, *A. López y López, quinto asalto. Memorias incómodas en el espacio público*, in: *Rivista dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Europa mediterránea*, 7 (2020) II, pp. 139–167; M. Azamandi, *Monumentos coloniales, migración y memoria en la Barcelona (post)colonial*, in: *Rivista dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Europa mediterránea*, 7 (2020), II, pp. 169–202; M. Rodrigo, *Une statue polémique dans la Barcelone du XXI^e siècle*, in: *Revue d’histoire du XIX^e siècle*, 6 (2020) 2, pp. 264–267; M. Rodrigo/U. Schmieder, *Políticas de memoria sobre la esclavitud en España: Barcelona en perspectiva comparada*, *Historia Social*, forthcoming 2022.

58 De Colom a Joan Güell: el llegat colonial de Barcelona, a debat, in: *Catalunya Ràdio*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.ccma.cat/324/de-colom-a-joan-guell-el-llegat-colonial-de-barcelona-a-debat/noticia/3025886/>.

59 Un paseo por la memoria de la esclavitud en Barcelona, in: *Barcelona en horas de oficina*, 16 March 2016, <https://www.barcelonaenhorasdeoficina.com/paseo-memoria-esclavitud-en-barcelona/>.

*No, these reforms [...] should not be granted today that would be disastrous [...] for Spain, and very particularly Catalonia, [which] has in the overseas provinces the main consumer markets for its products, markets that will disappear if the disturbance is carried to those distant and rich countries, and the disturbance will be carried, and with it the ruin, if the reforms in question are applied. And that ruin would be even greater, Your Excellency, for the very ones whom it is intended to favour, who at the return of a few years, would be plunged in the greatest desolation, in anarchy, in misery, and perhaps in the most abject barbarism, of which we have examples in countries close to our Antilles.*⁶⁰

They were referring not so much to what had happened in Jamaica, after the emancipation of the slaves (1833–1839), but in Haiti, after the revolution that had led to the abolition of slavery and its independence.

The removal of the monumental complex dedicated to Columbus has had fewer supporters. It has mainly been a political party of the Catalan pro-independence left (the CUP) that has expressed the need to remove his statue. The party raised this point for the first time in September 2016 before the Barcelona City Council and raised it again on other occasions, but without success.⁶¹ It should be added that most recently, on 12 October 2020, there were two rallies of very different political orientations on the same day, though at different times, at the foot of the monument to Columbus: in one demonstration (the one called by anti-racist and anti-colonialist collectives), a replica of the statue of Columbus was burned, while the participants in the other demonstration (called by the far-right party VOX) said they were there to defend explicitly the memory of Columbus and his statue. They burned Catalan pro-independence flags and shouted neo-Nazi slogans.⁶² We do not know what will happen in the future, but we cannot rule out that the controversy about the need of demolishing, or not, the statues of Joan Güell and Christopher Columbus located in Barcelona, both seen as symbols of the Catalan, Spanish and, European colonial past, will become more lively – symbols of a colonial past that was glorious for some, abhorrent for others, and uncomfortable for today's political leaders, whatever their colour.

60 Archivo Histórico Nacional, Ultramar, legajo 3554, exp. 3, núm. 7.

61 C. Blanchar, La CUP pedirá la retirada del monumento a Colón en Barcelona, in: El País, 26 September 2020, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2016/09/26/catalunya/1474889171_065220.html.

62 J. Hurtado, Vox protagoniza el homenaje a la Hispanidad en el monumento a Colón, in: La Vanguardia, 12 October 2020. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20201012/484005475589/colon-vox-pilar-hispanidad-ultras-barcelona.html>; G. Andrés, Vox celebra el 12 de octubre en el monumento a Colón, in: Metrópoli, 12 October 2020, https://www.metropoliabierta.com/el-pulso-de-la-ciudad/vox-celebra-12-octubre-en-monumento-colon_31969_102.html.