

Wednesday, 06 September 2017 07:22

History, Memory and the Ideology of Christopher Columbus

RAFAEL VIZCAÍNO FOR BUZZFLASH AT TRUTHOUT

As the symbols of the Confederacy have again become the targets of anti-racist social movements since the events in Charlottesville in August, activists are building on the present momentum to call for the removal or replacement of memorials belonging to other controversial figures in US history, [from Christopher Columbus to Frank Rizzo](#). As we approach the 525th anniversary of the so-called "Discovery of America" this October 12, it is an appropriate time to revisit the stakes of what it entails to memorialize the man credited with discovering the existence of another world beyond Europe, Asia and Africa, the so-called "New World."



Statue of Columbus in Ohio. ([Photo: Wally Gobetz](#))

The key problem raised by the critics of Columbus concerns the uncritical repetition of the colonial mantra that claims Columbus "discovered" this so-called "New World." For not only is it historically documented that Columbus never knew that he had arrived at a landmass that is not "Asia" (Europeans only realized this with Amerigo

Vespucci's accounts of his own trips well into the 1500s), but also and more importantly, one should ask oneself what it means to "discover" a region of the world that is not empty, but instead contains several flourishing civilizations in it. The issue is that the mantra that Columbus "discovered" anything presupposes the narrative vantage point of Western European imperialism, at the same time as it invalidates the narrative vantage points of the peoples that were visited upon by these so-called "discoverers" i.e. the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, peoples that far from being ghosts of the past continue to live in the present all around us ([70 percent of Native Americans now live in cities, not reservations](#)). If history here is written by the victors, the victims of Columbus have never been fully silenced. The victors simply refuse to hear them.

Against what President Donald Trump and many others argue, the call to remove the statues of Columbus is not done out of an attempt to erase or forget the history that came out of the colonial "encounter," much less out of so-called "political correctness" or anti-Italian sentiments. Quite the contrary, it is a lack of historical understanding that has allowed for the very development and perpetuation of the ideology of Columbus as the "discoverer of the New World" in the first place. The call to remove such statues (and likely other symbols of violence, such as many of those related to the Confederacy), has to do not with the erasure or forgetting of history, but with the practice of memorialization. In memorializing a man like Columbus with statues, street names, and so on, there are many presuppositions that go unexamined that entail fundamental questions as to who is the subject that is doing the work of remembering, or whose narrative vantage point is taken for those memories and stories to make sense.

To memorialize Columbus as a "discoverer" is simply to continue upholding a colonial narrative vantage point that celebrates Western European imperialism at the cost of the blood of its victims, making the subject that remembers here a Western European colonizing subject. If the United States is to be something more than a product of Western European imperialism and colonization, the subject that is doing the work of remembering has to transform itself to account for those subjects whose voices have been muzzled by the guns and pens of Western European imperialism and colonization, e.g. the Indigenous peoples of

the Americas and Black peoples. From their perspective, Columbus appears not as the discoverer of a "New World," but instead as the violent catalyst that would inaugurate the very end of the world, a legacy that lives through today's violations of Indigenous and Black lives. Taking this vantage point into account is bound to transform the subject that does the work of remembering and memorializing history. What is at stake here is ultimately the constitution of the "we" that remembers, whether it will continue to be a Western European colonizing subject, or whether it will be one that thinks beyond Western European imperialism, not by forgetting or disavowing the violent legacies of colonization and enslavement, but by fully understanding them historically and in their present afterlives.

Far from erasing or forgetting history, taking down the statues that memorialize Columbus is about doing justice to the victims of that specific history, as well as about coming to terms with how the legacies of that history have shaped the questions of who we are and what we represent. It is indeed about having a better understanding of history, and about remembering the past in a way that helps us learn from it moving forward. Doing otherwise would entail maintaining an ideological colonial status quo that remembers selectively so as to self-legitimize itself, carrying into the future unexamined legacies of colonization. Those that defend the ideology of Christopher Columbus must at least be clear as to what their worldview's presuppositions are before muddling the waters of the debate any further.

[Rafael Vizcaino](#) is completing a Ph.D. on critiques of colonization in the Caribbean and Latin America across literature and philosophy.



0 Comments

Truthout

 Login ▾ Recommend Share

Sort by Newest ▾






Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe  Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd  Privacy