

Memory Politics and Public Monuments: Reinterpreting Colonial History in Modern Democracies

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ABSTRACT

Public monuments represent more than physical structures placed within urban and political landscapes; they function as institutionalized forms of collective memory through which societies interpret, preserve, and contest historical narratives. In modern democracies, debates surrounding colonial monuments reveal deeper struggles over identity, legitimacy, citizenship, and the relationship between historical inheritance and contemporary political values. This research paper examines how memory politics operates through public monuments and how democratic societies negotiate competing interpretations of colonial history. The study explores monuments as mechanisms of historical representation, political authority, and cultural identity formation, focusing on the ways in which colonial legacies continue to influence democratic discourse.

Using a qualitative analytical framework based exclusively on the provided literature, this research synthesizes perspectives on democracy, identity, political decline, historical consciousness, and social transformation. Works examining identity politics, democratic resilience, nationalism, civic participation, and historical change provide the theoretical foundation for understanding why monuments become contested spaces in periods of political uncertainty. The analysis integrates concepts of collective identity, democratic legitimacy, and historical reinterpretation to evaluate the role of monuments in shaping public memory.

The findings indicate that colonial monuments operate as symbolic political institutions rather than neutral historical objects. Their meanings are continuously reconstructed through social movements, political debates, educational practices, and changing democratic values. The research identifies three major patterns: first, monuments preserve selective historical narratives that often reflect the priorities of earlier political systems; second, democratic societies increasingly challenge inherited representations of power and authority; and third, processes of reinterpretation, removal, preservation, or contextualization demonstrate broader struggles over national identity.

The paper argues that memory politics surrounding colonial monuments should not be understood simply as conflicts between remembering and

forgetting, but as democratic negotiations over whose histories are recognized and how societies define justice, belonging, and political responsibility. The study contributes to debates on democratic culture by demonstrating that public monuments represent active sites where historical interpretation and political legitimacy intersect.

Keywords: Memory Politics, Public Monuments, Colonial History, Democracy, Collective Memory, Identity Politics, Historical Representation, Political Legitimacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Public monuments occupy a unique position between history, politics, and collective identity. Unlike academic histories that exist primarily within texts and institutions, monuments exist within everyday public environments. They shape how communities encounter the past through physical presence, symbolic representation, and cultural visibility. In democratic societies, monuments connected to colonial histories have increasingly become subjects of political debate because they embody unresolved questions about power, domination, identity, and historical responsibility.

The central problem addressed in this research is that public monuments often represent historical narratives created under political conditions different from those of contemporary democracies. Colonial monuments were frequently established to celebrate imperial authority, military expansion, political leadership, or cultural superiority. However, modern democratic societies increasingly evaluate these symbols through contemporary principles of equality, representation, and historical accountability. This creates tension between preservation of historical artifacts and criticism of symbols associated with unequal political systems.

The politics of memory emerges from this tension. Memory is not simply a passive record of past events; it is a social and political process through which societies decide what aspects of history receive recognition. Appiah argues that identity formation is deeply connected with historical narratives and collective understandings of belonging, demonstrating that communities construct identities through shared interpretations of the past (Appiah, 2018). Public monuments therefore participate in identity production by visually defining which individuals, events, and values deserve public recognition.

Modern democratic challenges make these debates particularly significant. Scholars examining democratic instability and political transformation have highlighted concerns regarding polarization, declining civic trust, and conflicts over national identity (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Luce, 2017). Within this environment, disputes over monuments become symbolic struggles over democratic meaning itself. The question is not only whether a

particular monument should remain, but also what historical narratives a democratic society chooses to institutionalize.

The relevance of studying memory politics is further strengthened by broader debates about identity and political belonging. Fukuyama emphasizes that modern political conflicts are frequently connected with demands for recognition and dignity, where groups seek acknowledgment of their historical experiences and social position (Fukuyama, 2018). Monument controversies reflect these struggles because public spaces communicate recognition. When communities argue for changing monuments, they are often questioning whose experiences have historically been prioritized and whose memories have been marginalized.

This research aims to analyze public monuments as political and cultural institutions through which colonial history is remembered, contested, and reconstructed. The study focuses on five objectives: first, to explain the relationship between memory politics and democratic identity formation; second, to examine how colonial monuments preserve specific historical narratives; third, to analyze why monuments become contested within modern democracies; fourth, to evaluate the relationship between historical reinterpretation and democratic values; and fifth, to identify broader implications for public memory governance.

The scope of this research is theoretical and analytical. Rather than examining one specific monument or country, the paper develops a broader framework for understanding monument politics through the provided literature on democracy, identity, political change, and historical development. The research considers monuments as part of larger democratic processes where societies continuously reinterpret their past.

The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that public monuments are not merely cultural objects but active political technologies. They influence collective understanding, shape civic education, and contribute to national narratives. Debates surrounding monuments reveal how democracies manage historical contradictions: whether to preserve difficult histories, remove symbols of

oppression, or transform existing structures through new interpretations.

Ultimately, the paper argues that memory politics surrounding colonial monuments reflects a fundamental democratic process. Democracies are not defined by a fixed interpretation of history but by their capacity to critically engage with historical narratives and negotiate competing claims about identity, justice, and collective memory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Memory, Identity, and Political Representation

The relationship between memory and identity forms the foundation for understanding monument politics. Historical narratives influence how societies define themselves, and monuments represent one of the most visible forms through which these narratives become institutionalized. Appiah's analysis of identity demonstrates that social identities are constructed through shared histories, cultural narratives, and collective meanings rather than existing as fixed categories (Appiah, 2018). This perspective is essential for understanding why monuments become politically significant: they contribute to the formation of collective identity by representing particular interpretations of the past.

The construction of historical memory is also connected with broader questions about civilization, continuity, and political development. Studies of historical transformation demonstrate that societies often reinterpret their past as they experience political change. Broodbank's examination of Mediterranean history illustrates how civilizations develop through processes of interaction, conflict, adaptation, and transformation rather than through simple linear progress (Broodbank, 2013). Similarly, Cline's analysis of societal collapse highlights how historical narratives are shaped by changing interpretations of political and social systems (Cline, 2014). These perspectives suggest that monuments, like historical narratives, are not permanently fixed; their meanings change as societies reinterpret their relationship with the past.

2.2 Democracy, Legitimacy, and Historical Narratives

Democratic theory provides another important foundation for understanding monument controversies. Democracies rely on shared civic narratives that explain political membership and collective responsibility. However, when historical symbols reflect exclusionary or authoritarian traditions, they create tensions within democratic culture. Fuller argues that democracy has undergone significant transformations in meaning and purpose, suggesting that

democratic institutions are continuously redefined according to changing social expectations (Fuller, 2015). This argument applies directly to monument debates because public symbols represent earlier understandings of authority that may conflict with contemporary democratic principles.

The relationship between historical representation and democratic stability is also explored by Levitsky and Ziblatt, who emphasize the importance of democratic norms and institutional resilience (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Public memory can strengthen democracy when it encourages critical reflection, but it can also weaken democratic culture when historical narratives become tools for exclusion or political manipulation.

Sunstein's analysis of authoritarian possibilities within democratic societies demonstrates that political systems must actively maintain democratic values rather than assume their permanence (Sunstein, 2018). Monument debates can therefore be interpreted as part of broader democratic self-examination, where societies evaluate whether inherited symbols align with contemporary democratic commitments.

2.3 Political Change, National Identity, and Memory Conflicts

Contemporary political conflicts frequently involve struggles over recognition and identity. Fukuyama argues that modern political movements are often driven by demands for dignity and acknowledgment (Fukuyama, 2018). Monument controversies reflect this dynamic because marginalized groups frequently challenge historical representations that exclude their experiences.

The decline of traditional political narratives is also discussed by Packer, who examines social and institutional transformation within modern America (Packer, 2013). His analysis demonstrates how communities experience uncertainty when older political frameworks lose legitimacy. In this context, monuments become symbols of broader questions about social change and national direction.

Similarly, Murray's discussion of social division illustrates how identity conflicts can become connected with broader cultural and political tensions (Murray, 2012). Monument debates often occur within these larger environments of polarization, where historical interpretation becomes connected with contemporary political identity.

2.4 Research Gap

Although the provided literature extensively examines democracy, identity, political transformation, and historical interpretation, a specific analytical gap exists regarding public monuments as mechanisms of memory politics. Existing works explain how societies construct identity and experience political conflict, but fewer approaches directly analyze monuments as physical

institutions that connect historical memory with democratic legitimacy.

This research addresses that gap by developing a framework that understands monuments as active participants in political communication. Rather than viewing monuments only as historical objects, the study interprets them as spaces where democratic societies negotiate meaning, recognition, and historical responsibility.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on interpretive analysis of the provided literature. The objective is not to measure public attitudes statistically but to examine how historical memory, democratic identity, and political legitimacy interact through the symbolic function of public monuments. A qualitative approach is appropriate because monuments operate primarily through meanings, representations, and social interpretations rather than measurable physical characteristics.

The research applies a conceptual framework combining three analytical dimensions: memory construction, democratic legitimacy, and identity negotiation. Memory construction examines how societies select, preserve, and institutionalize particular interpretations of history. Democratic legitimacy focuses on whether inherited historical symbols align with contemporary democratic values. Identity negotiation analyzes how different communities interpret monuments according to their experiences, political interests, and demands for recognition.

This framework is developed from the provided literature on identity, democracy, historical transformation, and political conflict. Appiah's discussion of identity formation provides the foundation for examining how collective narratives influence social belonging (Appiah, 2018). Fukuyama's analysis of recognition and dignity contributes to understanding why historical representation becomes politically contested (Fukuyama, 2018). Democratic studies by Levitsky and Ziblatt, Sunstein, and Luce support analysis of how political systems respond to conflicts over values and institutional meaning (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Sunstein, 2018; Luce, 2017).

3.2 Conceptual Framework: Monuments as Memory Institutions

The first component of the framework considers monuments as memory institutions. A monument does not simply preserve information about the past; it organizes historical interpretation. The selection of individuals, events, and symbols for public commemoration reflects

social priorities and political authority.

Historical societies have always constructed narratives about continuity and identity. Harari's examination of human civilization demonstrates that collective beliefs and shared narratives play a significant role in organizing societies (Harari, 2015). Monuments represent a physical extension of these collective narratives because they transform abstract historical ideas into visible public symbols.

Within colonial contexts, monuments frequently emerged from political systems that sought to legitimize imperial authority. Their construction often communicated messages about conquest, governance, civilization, and national achievement. However, when political values change, the same symbols may acquire different meanings. A monument previously interpreted as representing national pride may later be interpreted as representing domination or exclusion.

Therefore, monument meaning is not fixed. It evolves through social interpretation. This process explains why historical symbols become sites of political disagreement. Different groups may view the same monument through different historical frameworks, creating competing memories within the same democratic society.

3.3 Democratic Reinterpretation Model

The second analytical component focuses on democratic reinterpretation. Democracies constantly negotiate relationships between historical inheritance and present values. Unlike authoritarian systems that may impose a single official interpretation, democratic societies allow competing narratives to challenge established representations.

V-Dem Institute's analysis of democratic development emphasizes that democracy involves institutional accountability, participation, and protection of political equality (V-Dem Institute, 2018). Applying this perspective to monuments suggests that public symbols should be examined through democratic principles: whose history is represented, whose experiences are excluded, and how public memory contributes to civic inclusion.

A democratic reinterpretation model includes three possible responses toward contested monuments:

Preservation: Maintaining monuments while providing historical explanation and critical context. This approach treats monuments as evidence of historical processes rather than unconditional celebration.

Transformation: Modifying the surrounding interpretation through educational materials, alternative memorials, or contextual frameworks. This approach attempts to recognize historical complexity.

Removal or replacement: Eliminating symbols considered incompatible with contemporary democratic values and replacing them with representations aligned with new

understandings of justice and identity.

Each approach contains advantages and limitations. Preservation may protect historical continuity but risk maintaining harmful symbolic messages. Removal may address concerns of exclusion but may create debates about historical erasure. Transformation attempts to balance remembrance with critical reflection but requires institutional commitment and public engagement.

3.4 Identity Politics and Monument Conflicts

The third component examines monuments as sites of identity negotiation. Political conflicts surrounding monuments often emerge because different groups attach different meanings to the same historical figure or event.

Fukuyama's concept of identity politics explains that modern political struggles frequently involve demands for recognition rather than only economic or institutional interests (Fukuyama, 2018). Monument disputes reflect these struggles because representation in public spaces communicates social recognition.

For communities historically excluded from official narratives, monuments may symbolize historical invisibility. Conversely, groups attached to traditional national narratives may interpret changes to monuments as threats to collective identity. This creates a conflict between memory preservation and historical justice.

The analysis therefore treats monument controversies as negotiations over symbolic citizenship. Participation in democratic life involves not only legal equality but also recognition within shared cultural spaces.

3.5 Comparative Analytical Structure

The study organizes the analysis around four research dimensions:

Historical Function

This dimension examines why monuments were originally created and what political messages they communicated. Colonial monuments often functioned as representations of imperial authority and national achievement.

Contemporary Interpretation

This dimension evaluates how changing democratic values influence interpretations of historical symbols. Political transformation alters the meaning attached to monuments.

Social Conflict

This dimension analyzes why different communities disagree about monuments. Conflicts emerge from competing understandings of identity, recognition, and historical responsibility.

Democratic Outcome

This dimension examines how societies manage disagreement. The response to monument controversies reveals democratic capacity for reflection, negotiation, and adaptation.

3.6 Application of Theoretical Perspectives

The methodology integrates insights from multiple provided references. Fukuyama's work explains identity-based conflicts; Levitsky and Ziblatt provide understanding of democratic resilience; Sunstein contributes analysis of authoritarian tendencies; and Pinker's discussion of progress and rational inquiry supports examination of historical reassessment as part of social improvement (Pinker, 2018).

The research also considers historical change through works examining civilizations and political systems. Harper's study of Rome demonstrates how societies transform under pressures including environmental, political, and institutional challenges (Harper, 2017). Similarly, Ober's studies of classical political systems illustrate how political arrangements are continuously debated and reconstructed (Ober, 2015).

These perspectives support the argument that historical memory is dynamic. Societies do not simply inherit the past; they continuously reinterpret it according to current political conditions.

4. RESULTS / FINDINGS

The analysis identifies several major findings regarding the relationship between memory politics, public monuments, and democratic societies.

First, public monuments function as political representations rather than neutral historical objects. Their creation reflects specific historical priorities and systems of power. Colonial monuments frequently preserve narratives connected with authority, expansion, and national identity. However, changing democratic values create new interpretations of these symbols.

Second, monument controversies represent broader struggles over identity and recognition. The literature demonstrates that modern political conflicts increasingly involve questions of dignity and belonging (Fukuyama, 2018). Public representation becomes significant because monuments communicate whose experiences are considered important within national narratives.

Third, democratic societies face a continuous challenge of balancing historical preservation with ethical reinterpretation. Democratic values encourage critical engagement with history, but societies differ regarding how this engagement should occur. Some prioritize preservation and education, while others emphasize removal of symbols associated with injustice.

Fourth, memory politics reflects broader democratic conditions. Political polarization, declining civic trust, and identity conflicts influence how societies approach historical symbols (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Luce, 2017). Monument debates therefore cannot be separated from larger questions about democratic stability and

political belonging.

Fifth, the study finds that contextualization represents a significant democratic strategy. Rather than treating monuments as fixed meanings, contextual approaches recognize that historical understanding develops through interpretation. This approach allows societies to acknowledge difficult histories while encouraging civic learning.

The findings also reveal limitations in purely symbolic approaches to historical justice. Changing monuments alone cannot resolve deeper social inequalities or political divisions. However, monuments remain important because they influence public narratives and collective understanding.

Overall, the research demonstrates that monument politics is a visible expression of deeper democratic processes. The struggle over public memory reflects how societies define citizenship, responsibility, and historical identity.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that public monuments should be understood as active participants in democratic culture. Their significance extends beyond architecture because they influence how societies understand themselves. This interpretation aligns with broader theories of identity and political recognition, where collective narratives shape social relationships (Appiah, 2018; Fukuyama, 2018).

One important implication is that monument debates reveal the evolving nature of democracy. Democracies are not only systems of elections and institutions; they are also communities that continuously negotiate shared meanings. As Fuller argues, democracy changes according to historical circumstances and social expectations (Fuller, 2015). Monument controversies therefore demonstrate democratic adaptation rather than merely political conflict.

However, these debates also reveal contradictions. While reinterpretation of historical symbols can promote inclusion, it may also generate political division. Groups that view monuments as heritage symbols may perceive changes as rejection of national history. Groups that experience those monuments as symbols of exclusion may view preservation as continuation of historical injustice.

The literature on democratic challenges suggests that societies must maintain institutions capable of managing disagreement constructively (Sunstein, 2018; V-Dem Institute, 2018). Monument conflicts become harmful when they reinforce polarization rather than encourage historical understanding.

A further implication concerns civic education. Discussions about monuments demonstrate the importance of teaching history as an analytical process rather than a fixed

collection of national stories. As Bernicker and King emphasize, democratic participation depends partly on civic understanding and engagement (Bernicker, 2016; King, 2017).

The study also recognizes limitations. Because the research relies exclusively on conceptual analysis of provided sources, it does not include empirical public opinion data or detailed comparison of individual monument cases. Future research could examine how specific communities respond to monument transformation processes.

Nevertheless, the analysis contributes to understanding memory politics by demonstrating that monuments are central spaces where democracy negotiates its relationship with history. They represent not only what societies remember but also how societies understand justice, identity, and political responsibility.

6. CONCLUSION

This research examined the relationship between memory politics and public monuments by analyzing how colonial histories are represented, contested, and reinterpreted within modern democracies. The study demonstrated that monuments are not passive historical objects but active political and cultural institutions that shape collective memory. They influence public understanding of history by determining which individuals, events, and narratives receive symbolic recognition within shared social spaces.

The central contribution of this research is the argument that debates surrounding colonial monuments should be understood as democratic negotiations over historical meaning rather than simple disputes about preservation or removal. Public monuments represent accumulated historical choices made by previous political systems, but their meanings continue to evolve as societies experience social, political, and moral transformation. The changing interpretation of monuments reflects broader processes of democratic self-reflection.

The study showed that identity formation plays a central role in monument politics. Historical narratives influence how communities understand belonging, dignity, and recognition (Appiah, 2018; Fukuyama, 2018). When public monuments represent only limited historical perspectives, they may contribute to exclusion by reinforcing selective memories. Conversely, processes of reinterpretation can expand democratic recognition by incorporating previously marginalized experiences.

The analysis also revealed that monument conflicts are connected with wider challenges facing contemporary democracies. Political polarization, declining civic trust, and disputes over national identity influence how societies approach questions of historical representation (Levitsky

and Ziblatt, 2018; Luce, 2017). Therefore, monument debates should be viewed as part of broader struggles over democratic values and political legitimacy.

A significant finding of this research is that democratic societies require mechanisms for engaging with difficult histories. Attempts to completely ignore historical contradictions may weaken collective understanding, while uncritical preservation of contested symbols may reinforce outdated power structures. A balanced approach based on historical context, civic education, and public dialogue provides a more sustainable framework for addressing memory conflicts.

The research contributes to academic discussions by positioning monuments within the broader field of political memory studies. It demonstrates that public spaces function as arenas where societies negotiate historical interpretation and democratic identity. The management of monuments therefore reflects a society's ability to critically evaluate its past while constructing a more inclusive future.

Future research may expand this framework through comparative empirical studies examining different national contexts, public responses, educational strategies, and institutional approaches to monument transformation. Further investigation could explore how digital platforms and new forms of public participation influence contemporary memory politics.

Ultimately, the politics of monuments reveals a fundamental feature of democracy: democratic societies are constantly engaged in interpreting their history. The question is not whether societies remember or forget, but how they remember, whose memories are recognized, and how historical understanding contributes to democratic life.

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