The Unequal City
Spatial heritage and the construction of narratives of exclusion:
architecture, street names and monuments
Lima, 1845 – 1945

Abstract

The departure point for this work, my MA thesis in 2022, was the unresolved tensions between the indigenous and Hispanic memories and identities in Lima, which I identify as the colonial wound. My task was to ascertain and reveal the possible reasons why, throughout its history and in a very consistent manner, the integration of its multi-ethnic identities was an almost impossible task to accomplish. This ultimately prevented the emergence of an egalitarian citizenship and turned the city into a place ruled by exclusion and separation. To this end, I looked at its spatial heritage with the intention of measuring the extent to which it may have played a determining role in the creation of inequality.

Admittedly, in the last 30 years several studies have addressed the issue of racism in the country, but they have done so mainly from a historical and political point of view. They have not explored the likely role that its spatial and cultural legacy may have played in promoting and legitimising social exclusion. This is the first study of its kind, hence its links to memory, identity and citizenship. To this end, three urban symbols were analysed from a decolonising perspective: architecture, street names, and monuments in the historic centre of Lima, from 1845 to 1945. The period chosen corresponds to a seminal time in the formation of the new capital after independence from Spain; it concludes in the years following the celebration of its first centennial and the impact it had on the city at large.

The information gathered made it possible to see how these symbols were used in the construction of a specific city imaginary, what mechanisms were put in place to do so, and what possible reasons may explain this process. Among the main conclusions, this work reveals a series of decisions made by the elites that sought to immortalize the memory and the identity of a white minority, thus defining a place largely unprepared to become the capital of a multicultural country. This investigation suggests a new way of understanding Lima's historical tensions from the perspective of its spatial heritage. The results aim to stimulate a critical review of the city's legacy and contribute to the formulation of a vision of common futures, considering its diverse identities and memories.

Keywords: social exclusion, colonialism, decolonisation, racism, urban symbols, spatial heritage, memory, identity, citizenship, narratives, Lima.

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Javier is a narratives doctor, urban activist and heritage specialist. In 2022 he got an MA in Heritage at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Before this, he led two campaigns to rehabilitate Lima's pre-colonial indigenous memory, erased from official narratives for over 400 years. He started out as a journalist, working for the BBC in London for 15 years and winning several international prizes, including the Sigma Delta Chi-Society of Professional Journalists awards in the USA. He lives in the Netherlands.

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