Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week’s guest, Richard Alba, is a distinguished professor of sociology who became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017, author of numerous books and known for his scholarship on race and urban sociology, which has later developed a comparative focus, encompassing the immigration of North American and Western Europe. Today he joins us from his latest effort as a member of the New York City Mayor’s Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers. Welcome, Richard.

Richard Alba: Thank you so much for having me, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: Last week, the mayor and your commission released its report. I just want to give our listeners a context for this because last year on August 12th, a riot ensued, resulting in the death of one woman as well as injuries to many people in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia during a protest that was conducted by and orchestrated by white supremacists. The country’s search for a meaning during these terrible events, which became a focus on public monuments, that may have been erased if not misled among other things. The suffering of slaves during Confederacy as well as what is the true and accurate place of Columbus in American history.

Tanya Domi: Mayor De Blasio took up this challenge and asked imminent citizens to review the monuments of New York City, which included yourself. Why don't you tell us about your personal takeaway about this report? How does it inform the ultimate findings of the commission?

Richard Alba: Yeah. Well I'm so glad you reminded our listeners of the starting point for this in the Charlottesville demonstrations, which as you may remember, led to an examination first in the beginning of southern monuments, which were erected in roughly the half century following the end of the Civil War and celebrated various Confederate figures, ranging from I guess the rather respectable General Lee to the much less respectable Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was a Confederate General who founded the Ku Klux Klan in the aftermath of the war.

Richard Alba: I think that there's a very big difference to start with between the southern context and the New York context that one has to keep in mind as we think about monuments. The point was made numerous times after Charlottesville that in the South, the monuments of the Confederacy were really intended as part of a program of white supremacy after the end of the war. They should be seen truly as symbols of racial oppression.
Richard Alba: I believe that the New York City context cannot be characterized in that way. Our history is much more a history of minority groups who come to the city and struggle to make their way upwards in American society. This distinction is very much at play, it seems to me, in the Columbus Monument, which was of course the ... You could say the casus belli of the mayor's call for a commission. The Columbus Monument was not erected as a way of demonstrating or showing visibly the superiority of one group over another. In fact, quite the opposite.

Richard Alba: It came about in the late 19th century because Italians at that time were really very much an excluded group. They were a group that was experiencing a lot of discrimination. The year before the erection of the monument, there had been 11 Italians lynched in New Orleans, an act that was even celebrated in The New York Times in that period. This was a way for a minority group in a sense to claim the legitimacy of its place in American society by associating itself with a figure, namely Columbus, who was at that time seen as one of the heroes in the American pantheon.

Richard Alba: I think that we start with a very different context. I think the commission was sensitive to that. The Columbus Monument again is an interesting test case because at the public hearings that the commission held ... Also at its invitation to comment through its website, what we had was a conflict between truly opposing meanings. On the one hand, we had Native American groups and some progressives who support them claiming that Columbus was a symbol of the oppression that Europeans had inflicted on Native populations as well as on African-Americans. The dark side of American history. That's a legitimate claim.

Richard Alba: On the other hand, we had very vocal ethnically-identified Italian-Americans saying, "You can't take this from us. This is our hero. We still identify with him." The commission I think wisely didn't try to make a change that would have been seen as the victory of one group at the cost of a loss for another, but to say, "What we need is an additive philosophy that expands the range of monuments, expands the range of groups and experiences that are reflected in them, and that way, accommodates the legitimate need of Native American peoples to be recognized."


Richard Alba: I did.

Tanya Domi: Explaining it here from the unique New York City perspective is really quite different than maybe a similar statue in Hawaii, for example. It really does speak to New York City's history and the immigration wave of Italians.

Richard Alba: And Jews.

Tanya Domi: And Irish.
Richard Alba: Yes, I agree. It does.

Tanya Domi: Yes. That's very interesting. Of course, the governor was quite outspoken about the fact that there will always be a Columbus statue in New York City.

Richard Alba: First of all, I don't think it's actually the governor's call because I think it's on city ... My understanding is that it's on city property. It's legitimately the city's call. I think that sort of preemptive strike in my opinion was really out of place. Let the commission do its work. If it comes up with findings that you think are wrong, you as governor of course can have something to say about them. But to preempt the commission's judgment in that way was ... I don't think that was the right thing to do.

Tanya Domi: Do you think the commission dodged a bullet by being more additive rather than removing any memorials? Was there any discussion about ... I'd like to hear your thoughts about that.

Richard Alba: Well first of all, we did remove a memorial. I think that the way in which the decision ... Actually, they're recommendations. They're not decisions. It's really up to the mayor and the city's design commission to make the final decisions. We did recommend removing the memorial for the gynecologist who operated on slave women. Yes, it's not being destroyed. Nobody is suggesting that anything needs to be destroyed, but it's being moved from a very visible location on the perimeter of Central Park to a cemetery in Brooklyn. I call that removal.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Fair enough. Excuse me for-

Richard Alba: [crosstalk 00:09:55] Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Clearly we need to be specific about what was your recommendations. We'll see what happens.

Richard Alba: To run through them, because maybe your audience isn't familiar with them, the commission was actually ... To start with, the commission was charged with coming up with principles and policies that could be used from now on to guide decisions about monuments. Either existing or the creation of new monuments. That was a good part of our work. Then of course, there were these contested monuments that had been pointed out beforehand. We took them as test cases to evaluate the principles that we had laid out. There were four. One was the monument that we recommended being removed.

Richard Alba: Another was a marker on lower Broadway. A marker that in the early 1930s, there had been a parade to honor General Pétain, who was a French World War I hero, who subsequently went on to become the leader of the Vichy regime, and in fact was condemned by trial after the war in France. Some had recommended that we remove this marker. We decided no. I think there's a
very simple rationale. It's not a celebration of Pétain. It's not honoring him in any sense. It's recording a fact. That fact is that there was a parade to honor Pétain in the 30s.

Richard Alba: I think that it raises an issue that I think will come up in the future as well in the consideration of monuments and what they tell us about our history. Now I'm speaking more broadly, as American history. That is the argument for removing it is really an argument to suppress an actual event. I don't think that's a wise thing to do. I think what we have to do is not suppress what happened, but come to terms with what happened.

Tanya Domi: And perhaps contextualize from an additive standpoint, right?

Richard Alba: Absolutely. Then a third case in point, and the one that really was left unresolved, was the statue of Theodore Roosevelt on a horse with a Native American and an African-American walking on either side of the horse. That stands in front of the Museum of Natural History. I think to be honest, that was of less personal concern to me than the Columbus Monument. I'm part Italian. I admit that played a role in my attention. I think the discussion of the Roosevelt Monument was somewhat hard to resolve because there was some feeling among commission members that there was some artistic merit in the monument because of the sculptor who created it. There was also a concern that it related to Roosevelt's relationship to the Museum of Natural History, and indeed, to other Roosevelt markers within the museum.

Tanya Domi: The Roosevelt family established the museum.

Richard Alba: Well, thank you for that information.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Richard Alba: Therefore, it really requires a lot more thought about how to handle this particular monument. Then there was the Columbus case. There was really a mixed decision on this case, and one that I completely endorse. On the one hand, the commission recommended leaving the monument in place. That was a majority vote, not a unanimous vote. There were certainly people on the commission who would have taken it down. On the other hand, the commission said, "This is a complex history that's not really acknowledged by this monument." Columbus himself in his behavior towards the Native peoples he encountered was brutal. More brutal even than the standards of the time, shown in fact by the fact that he was put on trial in Spain at one point for his behavior in the New World.

Richard Alba: The commission recommended that signage, but perhaps also other artwork--perhaps temporary artwork--be used to bring attention to this complex story. Finally, that in the vicinity ... This is something I very strongly endorse. In the vicinity of the Columbus Monument, there needs to be a new monument
recognizing the indigenous peoples of the city so that in a sense, there will be a visual dialogue then between the Columbus Monument and this new artwork yet to be commissioned.

Tanya Domi: That’s very interesting. That could cause ... Well, it could result in an engagement process and education.

Richard Alba: Well, that was the hope of the commission that that would happen.

Tanya Domi: Right. Then it becomes more like a process. Maybe even expansive, which is sort of a New York aspiration, to expand and learn.

Richard Alba: Well, if I could just point out ... The Parks Department has a website, which lists all of the monuments by theme on the Parks Department property. The number of monuments and the character of the monuments to indigenous peoples is just really embarrassing. This is something that really needs to be remedied. We’ve really failed I think as a city to recognize the indigenous people, the Lenape, who were the inhabitants of New York City before it became New York City.

Tanya Domi: Good point. Very good point. The commission has issued its report. Is there a followup review process on implementation or where does it go from here?

Richard Alba: All right. Well the mayor has endorsed the recommendations. He has offered to come up with money. I think it's like $10 million that can be used to commission new artworks. The Ford Foundation has also offered money for public programming in relationship to the monuments. The specific recommendations for change, like the removal of the one monument now on the perimeter of Central Park has to go to the city's design commission. That's the final voice on any changes like this.

Tanya Domi: Another question, Richard. What was it like to serve on the commission? You're a professor at The Graduate Center. You're a sociologist who's really well-known and regarded for your work in the field of sociology and immigration. What was it like to serve on the commission?

Richard Alba: I would be happy to do more things like that. Well, I think of myself--maybe I need to look in the mirror--as a sensible person and also someone knowledgeable about these issues. I was particularly excited to serve because I felt that the Columbus Monument, which had attracted the most attention, was one where I really had a grasp of both sides to a degree that I think people who are not of Italian background wouldn't necessarily understand. I had a grasp of why it might be that some strongly identified Italian-Americans ... Not all Italian-Americans by any stretch of the imagination, but some might still feel very strongly about the Columbus Monument and feel very identified with Columbus as a figure.
Richard Alba: At the same time, I understood that his behavior with respect to Native peoples was barbaric and that Native peoples tend to rightly see him as the kind of symbol of the calamities that befell them with European settlement. I felt myself poised in between these really opposing points of view and wanted to play a role in making any decision about this.

Tanya Domi: Well, thank you for what you contributed and thank you for coming in today, Richard.

Richard Alba: Oh, okay.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project. Thanks to today's guest, Professor Richard Alba. The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at The Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.