

It Wasn't Columbus' Fault. Or Was It?

Ottorino Cappelli (February 15, 2008)



Musings around a frivolous article about very serious things... and some suggestions for those who think that Christopher Columbus was just an "Italian" hero.

ANSA (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata) once used to be the sole Italian news service and a sort of semi-official voice. The old times are gone, but ANSA is still very authoritative and its current president – Boris Bianchieri – was the Italian Ambassador in Washington in the 1990s.

The Agenzia has an informative website (www.ansa.it) which also sports an English-language section, which I visit often though I find hard to understand its editorial policy. Articles here are much less numerous than in the Italian-language section and, thank God, they do not include all the boring political gossiping of which there is plenty on the ANSA website, like in most of the Italian media. I imagine they select a few stories they believe foreign journalists may be interested in when searching for news from/about Italy. And that sort of worries me.

A few days ago, the ANSA English-language home page has this to offer, among other things: ["Columbus 'didn't bring lice'."](#) [2] The article refers to the well-known fact that European explorers contributed to the spreading of germs and diseases in the Americas, including smallpox, measles, chicken pox, and scarlet fever that would eventually decimate native tribes. But, it reports with apparent satisfaction, according to a team of US and French researchers, Christopher Columbus wasn't responsible for the spread of lice in the New World. Indeed, these scientists seem to have found two lice-ridden Peruvian mummies dating back to the early 11th century – almost 500 years before the Italian explorer arrived in the Caribbean. David L. Reed, of the Florida Museum of Natural History, is quoted as stating: "The DNA from these parasites showed that the animals predated the arrival of Columbus by hundreds of years."

That's news – actually "good news," isn't it? But that's not all. According to ANSA the "good news



about lice ... will ease a little of the pressure on Columbus, whose historical reputation has sagged in recent decades." Things are getting more interesting here. So the article explains that Columbus has been "accused of brutal rule in his Caribbean colony and even the 'genocide' of a tribe;" that the "European hero has become a villain for many Native Americans;" and that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez "has led efforts to cancel Columbus Day." Finally, there are historians who "have also argued that Columbus Day should be scrapped because Vikings, Irish or possibly other explorers got to America long before Genoa's most famous son."

Thus the self-consoling, sort of "nationalistic" conclusion of the Italian newswire is that – at the very least – Columbus cannot be accused to have brought lice to the Americas... which "will ease a little the pressure" on this contested historical figure. Amazingly light – I mused. That's exactly the kind of news you expect to find – in English – on the home page of an authoritative Italian news service. After all, what it says is true...

It is true that a few months ago Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez renamed October 12 Indigenous Resistance Day. "We Venezuelans, we Latin Americans, have no reason to honour Columbus," he said in addressing a meeting in Caracas of representatives of Indian people from across the continent. In an attempt to provoke and lead a global protest against colonialism – old and new – Chavez added that in the United States too Columbus Day should be remembered as the Day of Indian Resistance. "Long live Sitting Bull!" he declared, drawing applause from his audience.

And it is also true that, in the U.S., the decades-long Columbus Day dispute has been often exploited to foment inter-ethnic strife, pitting Indian Americans, African Americans and Latinos against Italian Americans... as if Italian Americans were to blame for American racism.

But it is also true that such attempts almost succeeded in the aftermath of the 1989 "Bensonhurst tragedy," when a band of Italian/American youngsters killed Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager – "apparently in the name of Italian neighborhood values". As Robert Viscusi recalled it, the media readily presented the episode as an example of racial strife, and residents of the local Italian/American community fell into the trap by "making shameful spectacles of themselves, shouting racial epithets and engaging in an unforgettable dumbshow of bigotry, waving watermelons in the air and showing their middle fingers to television cameras." (Robert Viscusi, "Breaking the Silence," *Voices in Italian Americana*, 1, 1990)

So, the children of Columbus the-cruel-colonialist, may well be racist mobsters. That makes sense. But idiocies only endure because idiots do exist. Let me recall what Jerry Krase wrote many years ago commenting on the Bensonhurst tragedy:

"Pitting people who should be working together, against each other is a long-standing American tradition. Putting the blame on Italian Americans for American racism is not unlike blaming Irish Americans for anti-Catholicism or Jews for anti-semitism. Not too long ago – and to many, still today – Italians (especially Southern Italians) were (are) considered members of an inferior race. The idiots who held up watermelons while black protestors marched near the site of Hawkins death haven't the faintest idea that watermelons, racism and Southern Italians have a lot in common". (Krase, "Bensonhurst, Brooklyn," *Voices in Italian Americana*. 5, 2, 1994).

In sum – what's the point here? The point is that, notwithstanding the positions of these and other Italian/American intellectuals over the years, perceptions of Italian/American racism is hard to eliminate; and this alleged racism resurfaces every year, when October 12 approaches and anti-Columbus Day protests mount. And the point is, too, that ANSA should be less superficial, even



frivolous, when touching upon these subjects – for they are serious issues for many Italians living in the U.S. and elsewhere.

To conclude, I offer three multimedia suggestions for the anonymous ANSA journalist, and for our readers:

1) "AN ORATION UPON THE MOST RECENT DEATH OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS" as recited by its author Robert Viscusi for i-Italy. How Viscusi himself recalls in this video, the poem was written in 1992, when he persuaded the Italian American Students Union at Brooklyn College to join their colleagues of the Famiglia Latina club in a "Day of Dignity" demonstration to protest the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the New World. His explanation: "Look at it this way: Their parents, their grandparents, came to the United States because they were poor and they were looking to make a better life. Columbus came to america working for the King of Spain. Now, which one of them do you have more in common with? Why did your grandparents, or your parents, come here?"

2) NON CI RESTA CHE PIANGERE, an Italian cult-movie directed and performed by Roberto Benigni and the late Massimo Troisi. The two actors, who are inexplicably thrown back to the past, find out that it is 1492 – so they decide go to Spain and to do whatever they can "to stop Christopher Columbus" from leaving Europe and discover America. Their mission is to save the Indians from the genocide and the Africans from slavery (interestingly, they do not seem willing to save the Italians from emigration, probably because that is not the Americans' fault). Benigni persuades Troisi that "There is no such a thing as a good american man, in no part of the world," and they leave for Spain as "The Columbus Stoppers" (I fermatori di Colombo).

3) THE SOPRANOS' "CHRISTOPHER." The September 29, 2002, episode of The Sopranos entitled "Christopher" (Season 4, Episode Three). Silvio wants to take action against protests for the Columbus Day Parade by Native Americans, believing it to be an insult to Italian-Americans. Not everyone agrees in the gang, however, for Columbus was from Genoa (in the North of Italy) and Southerners do not like Northerners. Without Tony's approval, Silvio and a few others, attempt to break up the riots where a Columbus effigy is to be burned. Tony, who believes Columbus to be an "hero" anyway, tries to pacify the situation by talking to an Indian chief to convince his own people not to protest during the parade. In the end, both the parade and protest occur without mob intervention, which upsets Silvio. Tony tries to calm him down by telling him he should be proud for being who he is and not only because of his heritage.

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