

The Corleone Day Parade

Robert Viscusi (November 07, 2007)



Italian Americans have a long history of taking offense and of consuming big meals. Maybe it's time they started to laugh at themselves and to eat less.

“Why are the Italian Americans so touchy?” – Giuseppe Prezzolini

“Italian Americans suffer from an irony deficiency.” -- Fred Gardaphe

Denver, Colorado. November 2, 2007, All Souls Day – in Italy, the Feast of the Dead.

In this city fifteen years ago, on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Western hemisphere, Native American activists forced the cancellation of the Columbus Day Parade. Today, the American Italian Historical Association has opened its 40th conference here in Denver.



I attended the session called “Columbus Day in Denver,” which recounted the recent struggles over Columbus Day in this city, which staged its first Columbus Day Parade a century ago. Native Americans now protest and obstruct the celebration. Many Italian Americans insist on their right to keep staging it. One Italian American activist said, “I believe in Columbus.” But another prominent Denver Italian American suggested that maybe it was time to change the name of the day to something less provocative. There are many suggestions on offer, among them “Italian Heritage Day” and “Indigenous Peoples Day.”

Wondering whether either of these solutions might work, I went on to the next session.

This was a colloquium on Mario Puzo’s work. Professors from University of Illinois, Duke University, New York University, Stony Brook University, and City University of New York all took part in praising the subtlety and depth of Puzo’s early novels *The Dark Arena*, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, and *The Godfather*. I recalled that a generation ago, at AIHA meetings, discussions of *The Godfather* were greeted with cries of “sellout” and suggestions that serious people did not give serious attention to cheap stereotype-mongers like Puzo. Important things have changed. Now professors treat Puzo’s works as classics.

The Columbus Day session and the Puzo session had something in common: Changing heroes is never quick or easy.

And from there, it was a ready jump to the theme of this essay: We have a new hero. We need a new parade.

Columbus the Hero

Columbus has served us well and for a long time. He has had a long career, having been a U.S. American hero since 1787. In the hands of Mr. Jefferson and his friends, Christopher Columbus became a standard-bearer for the American Empire, as he had been a standard-bearer for the Spanish Empire before it. The Americans named their capitol The District of Columbia. Several state capitols and institutions of higher learning also used his name. It was only natural that when Irish immigrants wanted to show that, even though they were Catholics, they too could be model Americans, they would point out that the mythic founder of this Protestant nation had himself been a Roman Catholic. They made this point by forming the Knights of Columbus in 1881. Italian immigrants who were pouring into the United States at that time thought that they had an even greater right to claim Columbus. After all, he was not only a Catholic but an Italian Catholic, just like themselves. By the 1890s, everyone wanted a piece of Columbus.

Italian Americans, with their gift for spectacle, gradually came to dominate many public rituals in honor of this hero. They organized parades, they built monuments in his name. The Columbus story cemented their claim to a slice of the American pie. After all, Columbus was an Italian and he planted the imperial flag on American soil. Italians were Americans by right of inheritance. Their place in America, like that of the Irish and the Spanish before them, belonged to the Kingdom of Christ, the Roman Catholic empire of grace and light that had brought both the gospel and the gifts of European high civilization to the benighted indigenes of the plains and the pampas. No wonder they were proud of Columbus.

Corleone the Hero

But Columbus changed when American empire changed. This happened in the nineteen-sixties,



when the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, occurring simultaneously, showed America to itself as something less than the beacon of hope and freedom that it had long claimed to be. Its virtues had been the justification for its crimes. Now those virtues were called into question.

People stopped celebrating America's victories and started concentrating upon their own grievances. The African Americans, the Chicano and other Latino Americans, the Native Americans, women, gays, the handicapped, and many Vietnam veterans all began to object to the imperial agenda. It was inevitable that Italian Americans, whose real history was that of exploited immigrants rather than that of conquistadores, would begin to speak of their grievances, and would begin to join the resistance.

The form that this resistance took was original and powerful. Mario Puzo in *The Godfather* (1969) invented a resistance hero in Don Vito Corleone, who spoke for the right of Italian Americans not to join the American empire in its expeditions. "We are not responsible," he said, to the American big shots "who declare wars they wish us to fight in to protect what they own." We will take care of our own interests, he said, because that is our thing, *cosa nostra*. This was a resonant speech. On the one hand, it hailed back to the true history of the immigration: many men left Italy because they did not wish to fight in the colonial wars of the late 19th century, and others because they did not want to join the imperial wars in 1914. On the other, it looked forward to the future of resistance movements in the United States.

Don Corleone became the model for many leaders. First was Joe Colombo, head of one of New York's "Five Families." On June 29, 1971, Colombo led an Italian American Civil Rights League demonstration in front of the Columbus monument in New York City and was shot in the head by an assassin who was himself gunned down immediately. This event effectively contaminated Cristoforo Colombo with Joe Colombo, and it became part of the history of the ethnic rights movement of the 70s. Each group followed the agenda of "managing our own world" for ourselves because it was "our thing." And Colombo's fate left an indelible mark. When 1992 came, it was easy for protestors to question the virtue of the great imperial icon Christopher Columbus. On Saturday Night Live, a comedian used Marlon Brando's Corleone voice to play Christopher Columbus. Not only was the Denver parade cancelled, but in California, the Berkeley Resistance 500, endorsed by the Berkeley City Council, brought about the end of the Columbus Day in that city, replacing it with Indigenous Peoples Day.

The Denver parade was revived in 2000, but it had been sadly reduced and is now a ghost of its former self. Every year protesters interrupt. The parade needs to be protected by phalanxes of motorcycle police. One organizer said that his family is afraid to be seen cheering on the sidewalk when he marches. Meanwhile, the poets of resistance have taken up the myth that Puzo invented, another hybrid masterpiece. Al Pacino has brought the Corleone magic to Cuban and Puerto Rican criminals (*Scarface* and *Carlito's Way*). There are dozens of "gangsta" rappers who have taken up styles first codified by Puzo, Coppola, & Co. in the Corleone saga. Indeed, Italian American "Hip-Whop" rappers these days protest that African Americans have appropriated the Italian gangster myth (see Joseph Sciorra's page at myspace.com/capuzzelli [2].) The Corleones have become underground heroes, admired for their family values, their loyalty, their power, and their refusal to bow to the big shots of American empire.



The Corleone Day Parade

The revolution has already taken place. Ask your nearest teenager what year Columbus sailed. Then ask that same teenager who first said, "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse." You are more likely to get a correct answer to the second question. In the minds of many Americans, Don Cristoforo is a dim shadow on the Feast of the Dead, but Don Corleone is still vivid, indeed more alive than ever. If Italian Americans want a parade with an Italian hero, they might want to consider something more inclusive: A Corleone Day Parade.

I can hear people saying, "A Corleone Day Parade? Are you kidding?"

Yes, I'm kidding. But seriously, kidding is the whole point. This is a chance for Italian Americans to step down off the pedestal of triumphalist boasting, and to join the ironic shadows where most of the peoples of the world (Italian Americans included) actually live. In a Corleone Day Parade, we would not march in honor of an imperial conquest. Instead, we would celebrate our differences and our feelings. We might parade in costumes. We might mark our claims. Many groups, not just Italians, have claims on America. Every group has resentments and triumphs. Everyone has secret desires.

Corleone Day could be a sort of civic Mardi Gras. It would become what Carnevale has always been in Italy: a theatre of human complexity, an underworld of sarcasm and fantasy. We would not have the Corleone Day Parade at the end of the winter, when Mardi Gras takes place: most American cities are not as mild in February as Venice or New Orleans. No, we would have it on the day the Corleone Era began: June 29, the day they shot Joe Colombo. It would be a real Carnevale, though, the world turned upside down. In the Corleone Day Parade, we would all be able, not only to state our cases, but also to display our own least admirable lusts and ambitions. It would place the whole American enterprise (not just the Italian American enterprise) within the brackets of mass self-expression. We need to know one another, our sorrows and triumphs. We need to take account of what we have done. Everyone's a gangster sometime.

Italian Americans have had enough of boasting. It is time we took up the honesty of Carnevale. New Orleans has its Mardi Gras. But most of our cities have nothing of the kind. Carnevale is the one great Italian custom that we have not yet succeeded in establishing in the United States. We are strong enough now to make fun of ourselves. It will be healthy for everyone who takes part. People who tell the hidden truth don't need to eat as much as people who struggle to keep everything inside. Marchers will get to open up, to loosen up, to play their own favorite heroes and villains from American history and from old world heritage.

Columbus Day need not die. It could continue to find its own level in October, a celebration of Italian pride, Italian cars, and extra-virgin olive oil, a chance for politicians to court the Italian vote.

But Corleone Day would show the true drama of our history. Among the Italians in the parade, I see people dressed as Luca Brasi swimming with the fishes. Under the brilliant sun of late June, a float comes rolling down the avenue presenting Joe Colombo getting shot under the statue in Columbus Circle. A little later, you see Saint Francis of Assisi marching in rags. And behind him, barefoot, saying a rosary, that eternal penitent, Don Cristoforo Colombo.



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