Should We Celebrate Columbus Day? And Why?

Fred Gardaphe (October 07, 2007)

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(Above: Columbus, his feet in fetters, is sent back to Spain)

Columbus Day has come to symbolize the celebration of the Italian presence in the United States of America. This presence has not always been welcomed, but it has been a positive presence, and one

that is rarely celebrated in mainstream U.S. culture. It is no wonder that more than 100 years ago Italians latched on to Columbus as a symbol for their own experiences. However, Columbus, like many figures of history, has outlived his usefulness for all Americans, but for Italian Americans he continues to represent the struggle their immigrant forbearers overcame in becoming Americans. I am here to tell you that we do not need to depend on Columbus' story if we 1) tell our stories, and 2) incorporate those stories into the history of the United States.

A lack of access to our own histories, whether through the family or social institutions, is forcing us to depend on a sense of ethnic identity portrayed by others and outdated symbols such as Columbus. Outside celebrations such as religious feste and Columbus Day parades became the most important public presentation of Italian/American culture, but these annual events were never frequent enough to protect Italian/American culture from the regular mass media bombardment of negative stereotypes.

I could choose any number of examples, but one which helps us understand them all came through an Editorial that appeared in the October 7, 2002h issue of the St. Augustine Record in which Hansen Alexander wrote: "Tomorrow's Columbus Day Celebration will go forth undeterred by the fact that the Genoese mariner helped Spain, not Italy stake a claim to the Americas." Then begins his lament, "The holiday has come to celebrate that which is Italian, or more specifically, that which is southern Italian." Having made this distinction is interesting, but why is another story. Alexander characterizes southern Italy as an area more impoverished than the rest of Italy, and the birthplace of "tomato based foods like thin pizza, the notorious Mafia, and poor fishermen like Joe DiMaggio's father" (1). He complains that we do not celebrate northern Italian traditions like "the industrial might of Milan, the intellectual heritage of its great universities at Bologna and Padua," or the genius of da Vinci, Michelangelo, Galileo, Dante and Bocaccio. "No," he continues, "tomorrow will be about cheap wine and stereotypical visions of Italians as a congregation of vigilantes."

I continued reading the editorial hoping that this was someone's idea of a joke. But it only got worse from there. While the publisher of the paper later apologized for the publication of this editorial and it has been pulled from its online archives it represents more than the ignorance of one man. Alexander suffers from an affliction which is traceable to the difficulty in interpreting the various metaphors that have come to be associated with the United States of America.

To Italian Americans, America as a metaphor often communicated denial. It wasn't a problem of knowing what being American was, rather the problem came in trying to avoid everything that common knowledge said being American wasn't. Early twentieth-century immigrants from Italy to the United States did not at once refer to themselves as Americans, just as they didn't see themselves as Italians. Most of the early immigrants were sojourners or "birds of passage," primarily men who crossed the ocean to find work, make money, and return home. This experience is well presented in books such as Michael La Sorte's La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience (1985). In addition to language barriers, these immigrants often faced difficult living conditions and often encountered racism. In Wop! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination (1999), Salvatore La Gumina gathers evidence of this racism from late 19th and 20th century American journalism appearing in the New York Times and other major publications.

In response to this treatment, many of the Italians referred to Americans as "Merdicani" short for "Merde di cane" (dog shit). The word was also used as a derogatory reference by Italians to those who assimilated too quickly and readily into American culture. Most novels published prior to World War II depicted this vexed immigrant experience of adjustment in America; simply the titles of Louis

Forgione’s The River Between (1924) and Guido D’Agostino’s Olives on the Apple Tree (1940), tell that story.

I learned my idea of America through television, schools, newspapers, and through Irish American administrated religion and politics. And those media portrayed America as sleek, fashionable, material, present and future oriented. History played a minor (if any at all) role in the life of the average American. History was facts, figures and military victories in which the losers were always the non-Americans. And those victories represented the conquering of enemies that were inhuman or cowards, especially we learned that Italians were cowardly soldiers.

Everything non-American was weak and needed American assistance to stand up to enemies. As we grew older we realized America was a mis-read metaphor, but there had been clues all along...foreigners never fared well in the novels taught in schools and Italians, if they had written any American novels at all didn't count. As Guido D'Agostino's novel Olives on the Apple Tree warned, there was nothing to be done about not fitting into America. How can you expect an olive to grow from the apple tree?

But the sixties changed such immigrant fatalistic attitudes. It was as though life in America had been a masquerade party in which everyone in attendance had been wearing American costumes. And in the sixties came the unmasking, and we found that most were not really Americans at all. A once strong American identity was found to be a fragile facade, a surface, like ice strong and reflective until the heat comes upon it. And the heat of the sixties proved to be too much. Breaking the surface we find, like the analysis of any metaphor will prove, that its origins were much more complex than we had thought. The early metaphor was a primitive reaction between self and other. We would soon find out that Indians were the real Americans, the first Americans and so they would be renamed Native Americans--this carried over to Black Americans, Jewish Americans, until it seemed the hyphenation craze would never end. But this still wasn't quite what we were hoping for. Although we were now better connected by a bridge of punctuation to the word and thus to the metaphor we were still without accounts of us in history. What we had learned in history classes was not the real us, but the “us” that others saw and depicted. So many of us fell for those portrayals that when something like Mario Puzo’s The Godfather came along, we were forming "Godfather clubs;" so we didn't think we mattered, what mattered was what was historical and that meant it had to be red, white and blue.

More than a few Italian Americans were brave thinkers, who didn't fall for such nonsense, who realized we had always been in involved in history and so they started documenting it. Now we have books about us in America; we have novels, plays, and poetry that show the creation of the metaphor, the interpretations of the metaphor, and the alternatives to the metaphor. Today, we are experiencing a cultural renaissance that has come from the reawakening, the researching and recasting of our ancestors roles in the development of this land called America.

Metaphor was responsible for identity crisis of the children of immigrants, and the search though the metaphor for the real basis of the American signs. Once the immigrant lost the original idea of America, and the dispelling of some of its early metaphorical associations took place, Italians needed to replace it with another ideal--and that's where the notion of the "old country" came to life.

Italy became a metaphor for the post-immigrant generations, though stories told by immigrant relatives, the images began building. With that image in mind we went off to find that place called

“bell’Italia.” But it was nowhere to be found. Italy had changed, the metaphors of the past no longer could be found in the present reality. So that they could live on, we captured them in literature. The Italians who came here where never part of the “huddled masses yearning to be free,” they were not criminals forced into exile, they were the energetic and ingenious ones who had the vision, the strength and the courage to say we’re not going to take this any more and they did something about their lives.

Just as the immigrant was, for the most part, alienated from the mainstream economies of Italy and the U.S.--forced as most new immigrants are to take the work given to them or to make work for themselves--the second generation, the children of immigrants, became social immigrants, searching for acceptance in the larger society, something that would be easier for them once they lost the alien trappings of Italianita and mastered the means of obtaining power in American society. It would be in the third generation then that we can expect any mass movement into the cultural mainstream. The irony here is that to be successful on a cultural level, they would have to accept or return to what their parents had to reject.

Just like Columbus, the romance and tragedy of early 20th century immigration can no longer serve as models for Italian American identity. The key to creating a meaningful sense of Italian American culture that speaks to today’s youth is to first insure that they have access to histories, of their families and of their communities. They need to be exposed to historical and contemporary models in the areas of arts, business, and education that they can study, emulate and transcend. The Little Italys that once served as the source and haven of Italian American identity have become little more than cultural theme parks in gentrified land. With the move to the suburbs, Italian Americans have created scholarships for higher education, but have done little to help those applicants understand what it means to be Italian American once they enter those institutions. This knowledge comes best when it is found in the very materials those students study, in the very stories they hear and read from childhood up through graduate school. Writers such as Pietro di Donato, John Fante, Helen Barolini, Louise DeSalvo, Maria Gillan and countless others have been writing and publishing those stories, but how many of their wonderful works can be found in the homes and in school libraries where they can serve as models for present and future writings.

On Columbus Day, we should celebrate the arrival of all Italians to the United States, for they were responsible, among other things, for teaching the ‘mericans how to eat well! And we should do so by rallying around the stories that helped turned them into Italian Americans. So if you’re going to march in a parade, carry a book by an Italian American. And if you’re going to stay home to watch the parade on television, read a book by an Italian American, and if you’re too busy to take the day off, use the extra money you made and buy a book written by an Italian American.

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