

AN ITALIAN/AMERICAN DEBATE Columbus ‘the Man’ and ‘the Day’

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In mid September a group of scholars and public intellectuals created a blog in support of their call for “a new politics of memory inspired by the very values Italians mistakenly attached to the figure of Columbus.” Although we are not necessarily endorsing their positions, we believe the text merits attention and invite our readers to engage with its authors at nocolumbusday.wordpress.com Over four million Italian men, women, and children immigrated to the United States during the period of mass migration. The experiences, labor, and culture of these immigrants and their descendants has frequently been disparaged or simply ignored in larger historical narratives and by consumer culture. We believe these peoples’ histories and their evolving culture might be better remembered, understood and commemorated through means other than Columbus Day. We speak as scholars of



Italian and Italian American culture and history who have attempted collectively and carefully to examine this question from several different perspectives.

We invite you to consider our reasons for seeking to replace Columbus ‘the man’ as a figure of self-identification for Italian Americans, and to abolish Columbus Day as a federal holiday, but also to engage with us by leaving your comments on our blog nocolumbusday.wordpress.com [2].

Columbus ‘the Man’

The historical jury on the first Viceroy and Governor of the West Indies, Admiral Cristoforo Colombo, is no longer out.[1] Thanks to the work of several historians over the past two decades—and including the publication of thirteen volumes of documents and contemporaneous writings — Columbus can be credited with having been the first white European, not to “discover” a land that was known for centuries and inhabited by civilizations, but rather, to initiate specific and legacy-filled practices leading to enormous and centuries-long sufferings for indigenous people of the Americas:

- (a) He claimed possession of a land and named it Hispaniola on behalf of a distant and absent King, establishing a precedent that would be followed by all European colonizers thereafter;
- (b) He took native peoples captive and shipped them to Europe into slavery;
- (c) He instituted the encomienda system of forced-labor that brought thousands of Spaniards to the New World to brutally exploit Native Americans, which was then exported by other conquistadores throughout Latin America, and is considered by most historians to be one of the principal causes for the brutalization of the indigenous populations of the Americas, and for their dying in ever greater numbers under the ravaging consequences of contact with the Europeans.

Like any man in any age, Columbus surely had positive aspects to his moral compass. Some of his writings reveal moments of great sympathy for the individuals, those “savages,” he ruled over. For sure, he was an exceptional sailor, and he may have been a pleasant companion, generous with his friends, and possessed any number of apparently good qualities. But none of these personality traits or talents can be made to count as “historical legacy.” They provided real-life elements for his hagiography and the mythmaking activity that surrounded his figure for centuries, but they cannot be made to stand next to the record of his actions as Governor of the West Indies and their short- and long-term consequences.

To all those who claim that Columbus was just a “man of his times and should not be judged by the standards of today,” the answer we give is straight forward: Bartolomè de Las Casas and Michel de Montaigne were also men of Columbus’ times, and both were horrified by the treatment of Native Americans by Columbus and his followers. And to those who say that it was not Columbus, but the Spanish who were the “ferocious conquistadores,” one need only offer Columbus’ least famous words upon setting eyes on the inhabitants of Hispaniola: “with fifty men they could all be subjected and made to do all that one wished;” or refer to the new evidence, uncovered in 2006, of the trial for “cruelty” that the Spanish Crown instituted against Columbus, and which led to his deposition as Governor of the West Indies.

Last but not least, to those who defend Columbus, the man, and Columbus Day, the holiday, on the basis of their “cultural reference” to the so called “Columbian Exchange” of things, people, and cultures, between the New and the Old Worlds, we respond that this cultural exchange has very little—if anything—to do with the historical figure of Viceroy Columbus, and that the very name “Columbian” attached to this exchange is evidence of the myth-making activity that has been ongoing for centuries, in order to mask the colonialist roots of the tale of Columbus’ “discovery of the Americas.”

Columbus ‘the Day’

Congress has never decreed Columbus Day as an official day for Italian Americans, and it was not even made a federal holiday until 1968.[2] Nevertheless, over time and through much politicking, an association between Italian Americans and Columbus has been passed off as “real” and the holiday has long come to be celebrated as a day honoring Italian Americans alone. For example, just recently, while replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day as a city holiday, the City of Los Angeles also decreed October 12 “Italian Heritage Day.”

The “discovery” date of October 12, and the figure of Columbus, were unofficially commemorated for



the first time in 1792, before Italians ever emigrated en masse to the United States of America, and, therefore, initially, the date had nothing to do with them, because Italy was not even a nation. This celebration initiated the process of making Columbus a symbol of the European “spirit of adventure,” of Europeans’ claims to the “discovery” of the “New World,” and their right to “civilize” it. By the 1860s however, around the time Italy became a nation, a sizable, and mainly laboring class of Italians began settling in North America. Starting in 1866, in New York, these Italian immigrants and their families began to accept this colonial narrative by associating the commemoration of Columbus’ Discovery of America with the celebration of the contribution of Italian Americans to this nation.

This acceptance occurred in great part because of the success of prominenti, self-defined community leaders, many who in various ways enhanced their own economic status by taking advantage of this laboring class of Italians, and who “often acted as ethnic brokers between Italians and the dominant society.” Prominenti, especially in cities and towns in the North East, encouraged the celebration of Columbus, soliciting funds for the statues and monuments of Columbus and other notable Italians (e.g., Dante Alighieri, Giuseppe Verdi) with appeals to the working poor.

The connection between Columbus Day and white European identity was key to Italians in the United States, precisely because their status as “whites” was challenged by both the failures of mainland Italians as imperialist colonizers of Africa (Adwa 1896), and by the unprecedented influx of poor and under-educated Italians from the South, which marked all Italian immigrants as racially different (i.e. inferior) from Northern-White-Aryan Europeans. Italian American community leaders reacted by seeking to appropriate the “heroic” legacy of Columbus for the community itself. By 1907, Colorado was the first state to declare Columbus Day a state holiday, and, over the next three decades, forty states would institute Columbus Day celebrations. Finally, three decades later, in 1937, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the first federal observance of Columbus Day, to honor, as he proclaimed three years later, “the courage and the faith and the vision of the Genoese navigator,” which: “glorify and enrich the drama of the early movement of European people to America. Columbus and his fellow voyagers were the harbingers of later mighty movements of people from Spain, from Columbus’s native Italy and from every country in Europe. And out of the fusion of all these national strains was created the America to which the Old World contributed so magnificently.”

Roosevelt’s statement rhetorically connected three different moments: Columbus’ sixteenth-century voyages, the contributions of late nineteenth-century Italian (and other European) immigrants, and the creation of the United States from the traditions of Europe. Roosevelt’s confirmation of a specific national day to recognize Columbus came about in great part due to the pressure mounted by groups such as the Knights of Columbus, as well as individuals such as the newspaper editor and businessman, Generoso Pope. In hindsight, such pressure is entirely comprehensible, as a way to gain recognition for all Italians as fully “white,” and to validate their contributions to this nation. At the same time, Roosevelt’s decision may have had as much to do with a feeling of retributive justice towards Italian immigrants, as with calculations on how to further the assimilation of Italians, and perhaps distract them from their growing identification with Fascist Italy.[6] These relationships—which were foundational to the creation of the holiday—point precisely to the problematic origin of Columbus Day, because as they suggest some of the ways that Italian Americans were in some sense sold a bill of goods. In time, however, the disturbing connections between whitewashed colonial history, and the racist treatment of Italian immigrants as not fully white (or racially ambiguous), were buried under the increasing identification of Columbus Day with the contributions of “all immigrants” to American history, which is the motivation by which Columbus Day was finally established as legal federal holiday in 1968.

Over the past four decades, however, the number of states choosing to observe Columbus Day as a paid holiday has diminished to just twenty-three. By the same token, Columbus Day is no longer identified as a celebration of all immigrants, but of Italian Americans only, and regularly defended only by some leaders of this community. Most significantly, we can also trace a quiet but growing disregard for the holiday among many Italian Americans, even as other Italian Americans remain the only recognizable group to support it.

Today, in 2017, the social and economic position of Italian Americans is markedly changed. Do



Italian Americans still suffer from the sting of white-on-white racism, as they did in the past? Do they still need a federally-mandated holiday in order to celebrate their contributions to the success of America? But, most importantly, as a community, do Italian Americans wish to remain attached to a holiday and a historical figure so clearly linked to genocide, colonialism, and white-washed memory?

We are concerned that many within the Italian American community have failed to see the subtle racism of this reasoning. Just because earlier generations of Italians' racial identity was questioned, it does not make contemporary Italian Americans innocent of the privilege inscribed at the heart of Columbus Day. We instead seek a recognition of the struggles and continued suffering of others, and we reject this implicitly special association with the white majority, especially in times in which racism, ultra nationalism, and fascist-style rhetoric are again rearing their ugly head.

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[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/columbuspng-1>

[2] <http://nocolumbusday.wordpress.com/>