

Columbus Died 511 Years Ago, but If You're Still Holding a Grudge, Don't Read This

Bill Tonelli (October 07, 2017)



ONCE, WE WERE TAUGHT, he was a brave and bold explorer who sailed into the unknown and discovered the place we call home. Now, we understand, he was a genocidal mercenary who arrived thinking he was someplace else and kicked off five centuries of bloody oppression and exploitation. Okay, fine, nobody's perfect, though it seems possible to believe he was both. Meaning we just have to decide which Columbus we're going to ignore.

The holiday is a relic of when we admired conquistadors, when schoolchildren memorized their names (Ponce de Leon, Vasco da Gama, Cortes, Cabot, Magellan, Drake, where are they now, where are their statues for us to topple?). We identified with conquerors then, whereas now we must side with the conquered—all of them, everywhere, of all time—to be on the right side of history. Now that we are in full possession of the bountiful real estate those men stole for us.

Is there any better indication of how trivial our public lives have become that, with all the real life-or-death torments in the world, we're arguing about holidays and statues?



If we're serious about this, we'll have to do more than relocate some sculpture and change the label on a day off. There's a whole country in South America, a province in Canada, a district that's the seat of the U.S. federal government, and quite a few cities and counties all over the place that bear his name. Here, in New York, there's an Ivy League university and a major avenue. If we're going to start sanitizing our environment, we're in for a lot of changes.

It seems strange there was no widespread interest in creating either Indigenous Peoples' Day or Diversity Day until it was determined that Columbus Day had to go, to be replaced by a holiday that could also serve as an apology. Even now, we seem in no hurry to make amends beyond the ceremonial. Maybe we think that should be enough.

Meanwhile, future generations will someday believe that we have always honored the native people and cultures here before Columbus, a lie we may be happy to tell.

ALL WE KNEW was that he was Italian and he did something big and important, and that was enough for us. We had to dig deep to find a countryman whom all Americans might agree to admire. It fell to Columbus. Maybe if there were two Italians the nation liked, we'd be celebrating the other guy. But there was just the one.

The fact is that the immigrants whose naive hearts swelled with pride were possibly the least Columbus-like people on the planet. What they had in common with the great man was a boat, an ocean, a dream, and no clear picture of what they'd find here. Those peasants did not come to plant a flag, claim ownership, or take advantage of anyone. If anything, they came to be exploited by those who were here first. That was their best-case scenario.

To understand how those immigrants were welcomed in the years before there was a Columbus Day, we can refer to an article in the New York Sun newspaper, dateline Rochester, NY, July 17, 1887, that begins:

There has been recently organized in this city a society known as the Anti Italian Nuisance League of the Fifth Ward, the object of which is to rid that portion of the city of the presence of swarthy sons and daughters of sunny Italy...

The article then names several local officials and influential citizens who were

...waging vigorous warfare against their obnoxious neighbors. These gentlemen say that whatever is done will be done legally, but that their organization will remain organized until the Italians are removed from their community. Their watchword is "The Italians must go."

Carlo Barsotti was an immigrant who came to New York City not from the lowly south of Italy but the more refined north. In 1880 he co-founded a national newspaper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. It was his idea that statues honoring Italians of great accomplishment might offset the image (more or less accurate) of uneducated immigrants teeming in the city's squalid Little Italy slums. In his paper he started a fund-raising campaign, and he succeeded at getting his impoverished readers to pay for monuments not only to his fellow Genovese Columbus, at the traffic circle that already bore his name, but also to Verdi (on the Upper West Side), Dante (at Lincoln Center), Garibaldi (at Washington Square) and Verrazzano (on Staten Island).

As Bénédicte Deschamps wrote, in an article published in the *European Journal of American Studies*:

The building process seemed almost of a carnal nature as it allowed Italian Americans to actually dig into the flesh of the city.

"As long as Columbus looks at those small creatures who press around him today, and stays on his pedestal," Barsotti said, "as long as people bow to Verdi and now to Verrazzano, I feel happy," because "monuments remain while petty talks, gossips and calumny die away with men."

But petty talks, gossips and calumny have only increased their permanence since then, while stone and metal monuments are suddenly on shaky ground.



In Los Angeles, they've decreed that Columbus Day will henceforth be celebrated as Indigenous Peoples' Day. Denver, Seattle, Phoenix, Tulsa, and other cities have done likewise. Statues are in jeopardy in New York, Philadelphia, San Jose and Columbus, Ohio, where, it's safe to guess, they've got their hands full. In Minneapolis, there's a petition to replace a statue of the explorer with one of hometown hero Prince and rename the holiday in his honor. (Maybe they can compromise and call it Prince Spaghetti Day.) There are earnest proposals to replace the holiday with anodyne, self-congratulatory titles like Immigrant Day, or Italian American Heritage Day, or to simply swap honorees—to dump the murderous swashbuckler and replace him with the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, or the socialist thinker Carlo Tresca, or the doomed anarchist thinkers Nicola Sacco (shoemaker) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (fishmonger).

This politicization of Columbus Day is nothing new. He has always meant more than probably even he anticipated. You can chart the holiday's evolution by browsing through the New York Times' archived coverage, going back to when the event was deemed important enough for any paper to notice at all.

In 1926, when Italian immigrants were still despised as dirty, dumb and dangerous, the Times quoted former assistant District Attorney Francis Corrao, speaking before the Italian Columbus Society of Brooklyn:

This new world was discovered by Columbus to be the refuge of the oppressed and the hope of the multitudes who could not find freedom and comfort in their native lands...We rightly honor George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and other great and illustrious Americans, but when the Congress is asked by grateful and appreciative citizens to make the anniversary of the discovery of America a national holiday, we then find bigots who oppose lest an Italian be honored.

It was not until 1937 that President Roosevelt decreed Columbus Day a national holiday. By then, the ethnic bigotry had begun to subside, replaced by a new reason to worry about Italians—the fact that their homeland was on the side of the Nazis and fascists in Europe. In 1938, a crowd of 35,000 people heard New York governor Herbert H. Lehman speak out against this fear:

The courage, foresight and vision of Columbus are the common heritage of the American people. Columbus Day is a real American holiday. It should be celebrated by all people of the Americas. The courage and spirit of Christopher Columbus can well serve as an inspiration and an example to us of the present generation.

And in 1940, FDR sent a message that saluted Americans of Italian origin as citizens whose loyalty was beyond question:

The courage and the faith and the vision of the Genoese navigator 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.

By 1955, New York governor W. Averell Harriman even employed Columbus in the progressive cause, to rail against the Immigration Act of 1924, which used quotas to stop Italians and eastern European Jews from getting in. The law (overturned in 1965) was “a national disgrace,” he said, and elaborated:

Let us speculate on what might be the fate of a modern genius from Genoa who might want to come to America. He would put his name on a quota list that discriminates against Italians, and in ten years or so his name might come up. But then he would have to run the gantlet of other provisions of our present Immigration Act, fill out endless forms, undergo a long investigation and find sponsors here. Then, providing he had never joined anything or become controversial and had led a spotless life, he might possibly see our Statue of Liberty, if he had not long before given up the whole project as impracticable. And who would be the losers? We and this country would.



Safe to say Columbus will never look so righteous again. In another hundred years we may not even remember who he was, or how we got here, or anything else inconvenient or unflattering.

The poet Robert Viscusi foresaw all this 24 years ago, when he wrote "Oration Upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus," in which appear these lines:

the americans loved columbus in those days
he was the right kind of italian
not like these dirty dagoes and guineas and wops

And these, referring to how the explorer's halo had faded by the 500th anniversary of his trip:

no one wanted columbus
except the italians
they sat in their kitchens and said
he was ours when he was rich and lovely
and he has to be ours tomorrow
otherwise what are we anyway

Here's the thing that's easy to forget: The immigrants who chipped in for these monuments, they didn't particularly love Columbus either, even if they weren't evolved enough to hate him. Chances are they barely knew who he was. These monuments were built as a tribute to some beaten-down, disrespected, funny-talking foreigners who came here with the dream of becoming real Americans someday, shiny and new. Columbus was just their stand-in. He has not aged well. But Columbus probably doesn't care how we remember him today. Our ancestors, though—they may feel differently.

This year the New York Columbus Day parade's grand marshal will be the philanthropist and former Barnes & Noble chairman Leonard Riggio, who has decided to do something unprecedented in the history of the event and perhaps all such events: he has invited over 100 Italian American authors to march with him. Given the conflict over Columbus's glorification, and the typical agonizing nature of writers, some will no doubt decline to take part. I confess I deliberated—for two, three seconds at least—before deciding what I'll do.

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