

THE “COLUMBUS CONTROVERSY” COAST TO COAST / LOS ANGELES Let’s Lead America Beyond Columbus Day

Claudio Fogu* (October 04, 2017)



The Italian American community should celebrate the values of inter-racial solidarity, cultural exchange, and visionary humanism, which many mistakenly attached to the figure and legacy of Christopher Columbus

On Wednesday August 30, 2017, the City Council of Los Angeles voted on a motion for the replacement of Columbus Day with a new paid holiday called Indigenous Peoples Day. The motion was introduced by Native American Councilman Mitch O’Farrell in 2015 in recognition of the fact that Los Angeles has become the city with the largest indigenous-heritage population in the Americas. Initially, the motion did not ask for the replacement of Columbus Day, but only for the institution of a new holiday, and was supported in that form even by Italian American associations including Comites LA.

An awkward compromise

The City Council responded that it could not institute a new paid holiday without replacing another, and Columbus Day was the obvious candidate. This set up a process of consultation with all affected



communities that has lasted two years and has produced an awkward compromise solution: while the LA City Council has replaced Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day, it has also decreed October 12 as “Italian Heritage Day” (though not a paid holiday). This is important because it gives us a stark image of the current situation: while leaders of the Italian American community such as Councilman Joe Buscaino had demonstrated openness to renounce an exclusive claim to Columbus’ legacy by proposing to rename Columbus Day “Diversity Day” and dedicate it more explicitly to all immigrants, the LA City Council opted instead for tying the figure of Columbus and of the “discovery” day (October 12) exclusively to the Italian American community.

As an American citizen sympathetic to the need of supporting every initiative aimed at lifting the century-long suppression of indigenous peoples’ history of genocide and suffering in this country and continent, I supported the motion calling for the replacement of Columbus Day by Indigenous Peoples Day—though I also understood and appreciated the spirit of Buscaino’s counter-proposal. But as an Italian-born naturalized American I was deeply troubled by the LA City Council’s choice to decree the association between Italian heritage and the infamous date of Columbus’ supposed “discovery,” which the very same City Council obviously considered no longer worthy of celebration in its decision to rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples Day. The silver lining in this situation is that the LA City Council has now thrown the ball in the court of Italian American leaders and communities to interrogate themselves on whether they want to tie themselves exclusively to the historical figure and legacy of Columbus, or begin working with other groups towards a more inclusive celebration of “all immigrants’ contributions,” as suggested by Buscaino’s counter motion. Historical retribution?

Some say that the LA City Council’s decision was a rightful gesture of “historical retribution.” I have some problems with the concept of “historical retribution,” but not because of its supposed “presentism.” If Benedetto Croce could rightly affirm that “all history is contemporary history,” this is even more so for memory, and every memorialization was at some point in the past an act of presentism. My problem is with the idea that the replacement of Columbus Day by Indigenous Peoples Day can in itself right centuries of repression suffered by indigenous Americans on multiple levels.

Much will depend on whether or not “Indigenous Peoples Day” will be geared towards breaking the deafening silence in American culture about the history of mistreatment, cultural genocide, and betrayal perpetrated by white colonizers against all Native American nations in this country. From this point of view, I agree with those who say that the abolition and replacement of Thanksgiving by Indigenous Peoples Day would have been an even more appropriate act of restorative symbolic justice. But the question for Italian Americans has little to do with historical retribution—unless pushed for in solidarity with indigenous people. The question of Columbus Day for Italian Americans involves the modalities and values that this community wants to celebrate as “Italian.”

A new Italian Heritage Day

This is why in the weeks before the LA City Council vote I promoted, along with several other scholars, a petition for the recognition of October 10 as “Sabato Rodia Italian Heritage Day” [see the box below] and we are now working on collecting signatures for two letters. The first one will be addressed to leaders of the Italian American community and will ask them to facilitate an open discussion within their communities “to explore more appropriate ways, and new figures, through which to acknowledge and celebrate the legacy of sacrifice and generosity, that Italian Americans have given to this nation.” The second one will be addressed to members of the Italian American Congressional Delegation and will ask them to initiate a bill for the abolition (and/or replacement) of Columbus Day as a federal holiday.

Our reasons for wishing Italian Americans to lead into new practices of memory for the whole nation—rather than being boxed into denial and resentment—are too complex and multilayered to explore here. But suffice to say that although it might appear that our initiatives represent a timely response to the current political situation, our call for the Italian American community to dissociate itself from Christopher Columbus ‘the Man’ and ‘the Day’ has nothing to do with the current debate on commemorative monuments. We stand on the shoulders of new and incontrovertible evidence regarding the historical record of Columbus cruel rule as first conquistador and Governor of the West Indies, as well as the work of both Italian American and Indigenous American associations who have



been calling for the abolition of Columbus Day for decades, and have been successful in several Latin American countries and many US cities and States (only 23 States still recognize Columbus Day as Federal Holiday). Our goal is for the Italian American community to celebrate as Italian heritage the values of inter-racial solidarity, cultural exchange, and visionary humanism, which many mistakenly attached to the figure and legacy of Columbus (i.e. “Columbian exchange”), and to celebrate them as the common heritage of all immigrant communities. ww

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