

Blame it on Columbus

Jerry Krase (October 13, 2010)



This year's reflection on the Columbus Day Parade in New York City has become much more problematic as at least one of the Italian American characters who was proudly marching in it has attracted more flak than Christopher did in 1992. To find out who it was you must read the rest of the article.

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I often wonder whether there is a particular place in the Columbus Day Parade for half or



other “not quite” Italians, like the space in Limbo where the un-baptized have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ. I know there are lots of non-Italians who participate but they must be specially invited guests. Since I know Italians are very status conscious, who gets to lead the parade has got to be very important. The prominenti of various professional and cultural fields are probably first to step off and then comes the rest (il resto di loro). As Italian region seems to make a big difference to many, I wonder whether Northern Italians are first or last in line --- and what about the Sicilians? This year I understand that in honor of "Meet the Breeds," a group of Italian canines also marched in the parade. They included Bergamasco, Bracco Italiano, Cane Corso, Cirneco dell'Etna, Lagotto Ramagnolo, Neapolitan Mastiff and Spinone Italiano. I would have hated to march behind this pack of Italians.

Although, at the special invitation of a Turkish friend and colleague I have marched down Manhattan's Fifth Avenue in the Turkish Day Parade with the "Turkish American Professionals" group, I have never been similarly invited, or even encouraged, to march in the Columbus Day Parade despite having been Director of the Center for Italian American Studies at Brooklyn College, President of the American Italian Historical Association, as well as Vice-President of the American Italian Coalition of Organizations Inc. To be honest (per essere onesto), even if I was given a very special invitation I probably wouldn't have gone this year anyhow. I should note that I have never mentioned my Turkish Day parade credentials to my Armenian friends.

Although I can be considered left-leaning, for me the controversy over the role that Christopher “C” played in despoiling the Western Hemisphere is not the only issue. I am sure that if Eric Kasum who wrote “Columbus Day? True Legacy: Cruelty and Slavery” in the [Huffington Post](#) [2] was there, it was on the sidewalks shouting obscenities at the marchers. According to Kasum, the gentle, honest, and open native peoples impressed Cristoforo so much that he “seized their land enslaved them to work in his brutal gold mines, sold 9 year-old girls as sex slaves, cut off workers' hands, ears and noses of resistant slaves, burned escapees alive, and most horrific of all “If the Spaniards ran short of meat to feed the dogs, Arawak babies were killed for dog food (ucciso per l'alimento di cane).” A much more charitable view of Columbus Day is provided by Bill Connell who wrote in [The American Scholar](#) [3]:

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"When thinking about the Columbus Day holiday it helps to remember the good intentions of the people who put together the first parade in New York. Columbus Day was first proclaimed a national holiday by President Benjamin Harrison in 1892, 400 years after Columbus's first voyage. The idea, lost on present-day critics of the holiday, was that this would be a national holiday that would be special for recognizing both Native Americans, who were here before Columbus, and the many immigrants—including Italians—who were just then coming to this country in astounding numbers." Or Fred Gardaphe here at I-Italy who said a few years ago: " 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."

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For me going to the parade is more a problem of being associated with other more and less honorable, or despicable, Italian American characters who tend to show up at such events. I started thinking about this while watching RAI Television News (Telegiornale) on Channel 63 and heard someone singing the song "Maria" from Westside Story to this year's Grand Marshall Maria Bartiromo. Obviously no Italians lost money in the stock market since she has been hosting CNBC's "Closing Bell." Her Sophia Lorenesque looks obviously make up for the bad investment advice, or perhaps they (the men at least) don't notice. I was also not very entertained by a troupe of what looked like little people tossing pizza dough (piccoli pizzaioli?). I understand that there was also an appearance of Pinocchio (Pinnocchio) at the ethnofest; probably preceding politicians proudly pandering for the non-existent "Italian vote."

I must take the time here to apologize here for my recent blog entry; "Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe, Vote for the Guy whose Name Ends in 'O,'" that was so far off the mark. It was only belatedly, and regrettably, that I discovered Carl Pasquale Paladino as a candidate in November for captaining the New York Empire ship of state. For me he was an afterthought, way behind Rick Lazio, for the Republican Party nomination. Like America was for Columbus, an unknown wild and dangerous continent (continente selvaggio e pericoloso) that lay between two known worlds, Carl emerged just at the point in the electoral season when we thought (hoped) it was almost over. As might be expected, both Paladino and Cuomo were an essential part of THE parade and both got more press coverage after the event than did Columbus after he got back from "The New World."

I was going to entitle this essay "Vote for Cuomo not the Homophobe (Voto per Cuomo non il Omofobo)" in deference to the **really** nasty campaign that created a storm when Andy's dad Mario was running (and losing) against his old nemesis Edward I. Koch for NYC Mayor in 1977. In that campaign rumors were spread about Cuomo and the mafia on one hand, and Koch's sexual preferences on the other. Andy was, if I remember correctly, one of his dad's campaign managers. Both warring camps denied their excesses and, as in the current campaign, the candidates personally apologized for things they said they had no knowledge of. The "Cuomo-Homo" bit was so important that [The Gothamist](#) [4] reported that "Mario Cuomo Patched Things Up With Ed Koch For Andrew." In the story Koch, for his part, told [Esquire](#) [5] "The signs said, VOTE FOR CUOMO, NOT THE HOMO. Andrew says he didn't do it, and I believe him. Mario says he thinks he now knows who did it. I was very angry at the time. Primary races always end in anger. They're different than the general election: They're like a civil war — it's brother against brother. But I've forgiven them. I'm eighty-five now, and grudges take your energy away. I've forgiven them all."

Sadly, the name-calling wasn't the worst part of the 1977 election... it was Koch winning it. Koch ran as a clean reformer but during his tenure in City Hall we got more scandals than one could shake a stick at (più scandali che uno potrebbe agitare un bastone a). According to Jack Newfield and Wayne Barrett's *City for Sale: Ed Koch and the Betrayal of New York* (Harper & Row): "When he was elected mayor in 1977 Koch's reputation rested on his anti-machine credentials. But by 1982, he was kicking off an ill-fated gubernatorial campaign with a press conference flanked by Democratic party bosses—Bronx boss Stanley Friedman ..." who was convicted in 1987 for bribery and racketeering, Queens boss Donald Manes who committed suicide in 1986 while under investigation, and Meade Esposito who was convicted in 1988 for bribing Congressman Mario Biaggi.

Accusations have also flown back and forth about Paladino's and Cuomo's real and imagined scandalous moral lapses in business and politics. Naturally it is sex that gets the most attention. From the prurient interest angle we have on the one hand Carl trumpeting Andy's alleged infidelity, and loudly condemning same sex sex as well as same sex marriage. On the other hand we have the Cuomo campaign pretending not to notice Paladino's own extramarital sexual exploits of the "normal" kind. Unlike Fox News, The New York Post, and The World Street Journal I don't pretend to be fair and balanced (giusto ed equilibrato) when it comes to the world in which I live. There are lots of people, Italian American and otherwise who are telling me that they have some difficulty voting for Andrew Cuomo in this New York State Gubernatorial election. As I have often said, if you can't find something to like about Mario and Andy, then do it for Matilda.



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