

Anthony J. Tamburri. *The Columbus Affair: Imperatives for an Italian/American Agenda.* New Fairfield: Casa Lago Press, 2021. 110 pp. \$10.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-955995-00-9.

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Should Christopher Columbus be considered a hero of navigation or the symbol of modern slavery? To answer this question, it is necessary to recall the political background that marked Donald Trump presidency between 2017 and 2021, with specific reference to the rise of social phenomena such as the anti-Columbus movement in particular. The first episode of such political extremism occurred in Charlottesville, VA, in August 2017 during the Unite the Right rally, which had been arranged by white supremacists to oppose the removal of Confederate general Robert E. Lee's statue. Shortly after it began, the demonstration degenerated into open clashes between supremacists, law enforcement officers, and antiracist protesters until a car bombing caused the death of one antiracist demonstrator and injured thirty-five others.[1] A few years later, the Black Lives Matter movement (born in 2013) saw a significant increase in numbers of supporters following the murder of the African American George Floyd in Minneapolis by police officer Derek Chauvin.

Widespread anger against the white majority led, a few months later, to a historical revaluation of the explorer Christopher Columbus by the Native American community, which, on the basis of the current historical context, started to reevaluate him as a symbol of white supremacism and as an embodiment of negative values such as slavery,

colonialism, and exploitation of human and natural resources. As a clear example of the conditioning of local politics by the anti-Columbus movement, author Anthony Julian Tamburri (dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College, CUNY and Distinguished Professor of European Languages and Literatures) mentions the decision by the City Council of Akron, OH, to erase the memory of Columbus and to rename Columbus Day (the second Monday in October) Italian American Heritage and Culture Day, while still allowing the Italian American community to cite the navigator's story during their celebrations. Between 2018 and 2020, acts of vandalism carried out against Columbus statues in major US cities such as Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles increasingly persuaded local authorities to enact city ordinances aimed at removing such monuments. Although Tamburri already addressed this matter in late 2017 in an article in *La Voce di New York*,[2] in this book he takes up this topic in order to reply to the "deafening silence" (p. 11) he witnessed between June and July 2020 around the exacerbation of hatred toward the Italian navigator, and analyzes all the opinions that supported the anti-Columbus movement as well as those that, conversely, opposed its negative historical review.

By the three-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America in 1792, Columbus was con-

sidered by the newborn United States as a myth of modernity, and this mythologizing continued to be supported even in 1828 by diplomat Washington Irving's work *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. A century later, despite the lynching of eleven Italians that occurred in New Orleans in 1891, Columbus was positively portrayed as the personification of the willpower of millions of Italian immigrants who, at that time, were ready to leave their homeland to seek their fortune in the United States. Although at the end of the nineteenth century federal authorities showed some distrust of Italian immigrants through Republican congressman Henry Cabot Lodge's proposal to implement a literacy test before their entry into the United States, they remained undeterred and clung to any symbol that could dignify and justify their arrival in the country, including the Genoese navigator as the one who discovered America. It is no coincidence that in those years Italian immigrants began to use the name of Columbus in order to assert a dual Italian American identity and that Columbus Day was established in the state of Colorado by Angelo Noce in 1906, founder of the Italian American newspaper *La Stella* from Denver, before its formalization in 1937 by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In the 1980s, another US president, Ronald Reagan, paid tribute to the Genoese navigator as a great explorer who "challenged the unknown and thereby found a New World." [3] However, the latest acts of Columbus "damnatio memoriae" (which began as protests against police brutality and anything that could lead back to white supremacy) increased the popularity of the anti-Columbus movement, which had actually already been born in 1992, when the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America was celebrated and, for the first time, doubts began to arise about the responsibility the explorer had for the sad fate of Native Americans. Unlike Colorado, Columbus Day was never celebrated in other states, so that even in 1990 South Dakota established the Native American Day, and in 1992 the city of Berkeley, CA, fol-

lowed suit by celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day instead of Columbus Day, in order to commemorate the victims of modern geographical discoveries. Around the early 1990s US historiography began to produce a series of hypothesis aimed at disbanding the fake myth of Columbus, starting with works by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Hans Koning, David E. Stannard, and John P. Larnier, which then became oversaturated and effectively came to constitute an integral part of US studies on Columbus's questionable role in the United States and the history of Italian Americans. [4] Tamburri's own work should be included in this section on historical studies on the portrayal of Italian and Italian American culture in literature, cinema, semiotics, and public history in general.

In this book, the author specifies that it is not to be taken for granted that being anti-Columbus equals anti-Italian or anti-Italian American by default, since the anti-Columbus movement has always been based on the condemnation of slavery, for which the explorer was allegedly responsible, rather than on his national identity (which is, moreover, still disputed between Italy and Spain). On one hand, as the Native American community suggested, it is true that the figure of Columbus could be replaced by other famous Italian or Italian American characters such as "Galileo, Leonardo da Vinci, Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra" (p. 35). On the other hand, it is also true that no one else continues, as Columbus does, to best represent the historical relation between Italy and the United States, if one takes into account the strong cultural, political, economic, and social connections that the two countries began to establish, especially since the time of mass migration. For Italian Americans, Columbus embodied that *trait d'union* between the US and Italian cultures, which in this way legitimized the importance of the Italian ethnic community in US society, culture, and politics. Over the centuries, however, the assimilation of Italians into the US social tissue and their turning into Italian Americans also led to a concurrent criticism of Columbus. Indeed,

between 1892 and 1992, the gradual integration of Italian American figures into systems of power meant that the previous stereotype of the dirty and violent Italian immigrant was replaced with the new cliché of the conservative politician close to the white supremacist movement. In this way, even the figure of Columbus took on a negative meaning in recent years compared to the decades of great Italian mass migration. According to French historian Bénédicte Deschamps, no other US city has better represented this contradiction than New York City, which, from the office of Fiorello La Guardia to the one of Rudolph Giuliani, led the memory of Columbus as the “Founding Father of America” (p. 20) to its decline into a deep contempt for his monuments aimed at hurting the Italian American elite and its ethnic identity.

As for the primary sources Tamburri mentions in the book, they are few and they only deal indirectly with Columbus, since they identify the economic interest by popes such as Alexander VI (1492-1503), who justified the exploitation and subjection of entire Amerindian populations through the indiscriminate use of violence by Portuguese and Spanish conquistadores. Tamburri refers to the *Journal of Christopher Columbus* (edited by Clements R. Markham), *The First Voyage* (edited by Fernandez-Armesto), and the memories of Columbus’s contemporary, Spanish soldier Francisco de Bobadilla (edited by Spanish historian Consuelo Varela) to reconstruct the life of the Italian navigator. However, these documents are not sufficient to give the reader a clear picture of the character, considering also that *The First Voyage* is introduced by Tamburri himself as a “debatable document” (p. 30) and, therefore, not a very reliable source for an accurate historical reconstruction. In addition to the lack of a thorough and more extensive review of primary sources that could have better illustrated Columbus’s historical persona, the bulk of this book is based on an ambiguous stance by the author that certainly does not help in providing the reader with a precise idea of the historical and social problem that the

Genoese navigator represented and keeps representing for the Italian American ethnic community. The book, finally, fails to develop a crucial (and not always obvious to the reader) overview of the historical context in which Columbus lived and the multiple modern cultural contexts in which he personified values such as heroism and bravery, as well as negative values such as slavery and violence.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the author does not give as much importance to the content of his primary sources as he does to their multiple interpretations, which, as a result, convey a different message depending on who is the reader and when, where, and why they read. Actually, in the article “Interpretation in History” by the US historian Hayden White, understanding the historical context is fundamental to have an accurate idea about characters, events, or places that one knows thanks to the consultation of primary sources in order to have the best possible representation of the past. If the interpretation of history always changes, then it is true that, for the author, the *Columbus Affair* results in a mere “question of moral relativism and semiotics” (p. 53) in which, according to the spirit of the times, Columbus could be seen as the object of predatory intentions by popes and monarchs toward unexplored lands or, rather, as the protagonist of the “single most important event in the history of the human species” (pp. 33-34) for combining two continents that remained inexorably separated by the Atlantic Ocean until 1492. Based on these assumptions, it would be more correct to condemn the two founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who were slave owners themselves, as well as being more embedded in the modern ideological context of European supremacy to the detriment of Native American and African populations, than the Renaissance period when Columbus lived. Moreover, the US Supreme Court continued to claim in *Johnson vs. McIntosh* (1823) that the “Indians had no right of soil as sovereign” (p. 50) because their lands were not demarcated

by precise national boundaries and, consequently, could legitimately be considered as the object of conquest by pioneers. For this reason, Columbus could not be criticized as much as two other censored historical characters such as General Robert E. Lee, who was the protagonist of the bloody American Civil War, or Dr. J. Marion Sims (father of modern gynecology), who was reviewed as a torturer of African American women for his medical experiments.

In conclusion, Tamburri wants to try to make the reader understand that the latest episodes against the memory of Columbus were based on a huge misunderstanding whereby the ignorance of US public opinion lumped his name and enterprises together with the later period of the enslavement of Native American peoples by European states. As an Italian American, Tamburri wants to criticize the public use of Columbus's name (rather than his historical role) that, on each anniversary of the discovery of America, has always been considered by the US public opinion differently according to the current historical moment.

Notes

[1]. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Brian M. Rosenthal, "Man Charged after White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>. Accessed Jun. 9, 2022.

[2]. Anthony Julian Tamburri, "The Columbus Controversy and the Politics of Omission," *La Voce di New York*, Dec. 17, 2017, <https://lavocedinyork.com/en/new-york/2017/12/17/the-columbus-controversy-and-the-politics-of-omission/>. Accessed Jun. 9, 2022.

[3]. Arica L. Coleman, "The History Behind the Movement to Replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day," *Time*, Oct. 4, 2019, <https://time.com/4971178/indigenous-peoples-day-history-columbus-day/>. Accessed Jun. 9, 2022.

time.com/4971178/indigenous-peoples-day-history-columbus-day/. Accessed Jun. 9, 2022.

[4]. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Columbus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Hans Koning, *Columbus: His Enterprise: Exploding the Myth* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1991); David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John P. Larner, "North American Hero? Christopher Columbus 1702-2002," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137: 1 (1993): 46-63.

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