

FORWARD MOTION:

Exposing Columbus;
Taking the glory out of
Racism and Genocide.
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Italian-Americans: Say basta to Columbus

by Juliet Ucelli

In January, 1992, a few New Yorkers founded Italian-Americans for a Multicultural U.S. During the Quincentennial year, we wanted to lend support to Native Americans, Blacks and Latinos who were opposing the glorification of Christopher Columbus and calling for inclusive, anti-racist education in schools and colleges. But the response to our work is pushing us to do more than that. It has taught us some general lessons about how we can win over people of European descent to break from a racist identity and support the self-determination of peoples of color.

Why an Italian-American anti-Columbus group

Columbus was marbleized and deified because of two complementary trends. First and primarily, businessmen, government officials and generals of Northern European descent, especially around the 1892 Quatercentenary, wanted to keep on doing what Columbus did: go into other people's lands, take them over and exploit labor and resources. By glorifying Columbus, they were justifying in advance their own incursions into Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Second, poor Italians and Sicilians were fleeing centuries of conquest, occupation and agricultural serfdom to a land where popular magazines called them "beaten men of beaten races, so much slag in the melting pot." They wanted to show that they were really as good as Americans, in fact essential contributors to America, because one of their countrymen "discovered" it. So they gave their pennies to the publisher of *Il Progresso* to erect a statue at Columbus Circle, New York City, in 1892.

To this day, the mass base of Columbus celebration is Italian-Americans, and secondarily, other Catholics; the Knights of Columbus claim about 1.5 million members, mostly suburban small businessmen and professionals. Right-wing argument samplers like Arthur Schlesinger may be hurling invective against p.c., but they're not out there marching in parades. Such parades are weighty social events only in cities with significant Italian-American populations, and if Italian-Americans stopped marching, there would be no Columbus Day parades.

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Courtesy of Mrs. Esther Jackson, Freedomways

Paul Robeson with W.E.B. DuBois and Vito Marcantonio, New York City, 1940s.

In New York City, as Columbus became less defensible on ethical grounds, the conservatives' main fallback was to brand groups who opposed celebration of Columbus as anti-Italian. They took the legitimate gripes of Italian-Americans and made them excuses for this reactionary hoopla. They said, "Italian-Americans are always portrayed as gangsters or buffoons, so they need a hero. 21% of Italian-American youth in NYC don't finish high school (the highest dropout rate after Latinos and Blacks), so don't lower their self-esteem by questioning their role models."

We started IAMUS so that progressives in other communities couldn't be branded as anti-Italian, so they could say "Look, there are Italian-Americans who despise Columbus and don't want to be identified with him; here's their statement." The other compelling reason was the shame we felt about the lack of an organized, public Italian-American voice against racism: a shame that had been building since the murders of two Black youths, Michael Griffith in Howard Beach and Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, by groups which involved Italian-American youth in Italian-American neighborhoods. Some of us had worked with Italian-Americans for Dinkins, supporting the

election of New York City's first African-American mayor, which was, for all its obvious limits, the only outlet available to us.

With a core of about a dozen active folks, IAMUS issued a founding statement, now endorsed by over 100 people, that pointed out some absurdities of Italian-American identification with Columbus and demanded recognition for other Italian-American figures and traditions. We noted that the American Indian Movement takes care not to blame Italian-Americans for what Columbus did and has offered to accept a Multicultural Day or Italian-American Appreciation Day in place of the offensive holiday. We pointed out that Italy as such didn't even exist until 1861; that Columbus came from Genoa and not the Southern (Mezzogiorno) regions where 80% of Italian-Americans have roots; and that his expedition was sponsored by, launched from and benefited only Spain!

We also rejected any "self-esteem" based on a denial of the wrongs done to other peoples, and demanded that schools help young people to evaluate acts by consistent ethical standards. As an analogy, we asked: would anyone seriously propose that we not talk about the Nazi murders of thirteen million Jews, Gypsies, Poles, radicals, labor

unionists, homosexuals and others, because it would damage the self-esteem of German-American youth? And finally, since we Italian-Americans are legitimately looking for alternatives to gangster images, we pointed out that someone who killed, robbed and tortured—and bragged about it in his diaries—doesn't really qualify!

To help foster a positive basis for pride, we emphasized two main themes in articles and discussions with fellow Italian-Americans: the history of what Italian-Americans and peoples of color have in common, as well as the conflicts, between Italian-Americans and peoples of color; and Italian-American traditions of resistance to the oppression dealt us by mainstream American capitalist culture. For example, there's even a hidden history of challenges to Columbus' glorification. During the 1930s, some anarchist, communist and progressive Italian-American workers in Providence, Rhode Island physically attacked Columbus Day parades because parade organizers were supporters of Mussolini (which was the case in many cities).

Earlier, in the 1880s and '90s, new Italian immigrants to Louisiana were the only non-Blacks who would work in the fields alongside Blacks, because we hadn't yet learned to think of ourselves as white and superior. Italians shared many conditions of life with Africans, learned from their culture (hence the Italian-American presence in New Orleans jazz), and were treated badly by the white power structure, like Africans. In 1891, a mob led by the district attorney of New Orleans lynched eleven Italian-Americans in the parish prison, after an accusation that they had conspired to murder a police chief.

We also mention Italian-Americans who consciously opposed white supremacist practices and attitudes in their own community and forged alliances with people of color. One key figure is Vito Marcantonio, the seven-term New York City congressman who was arguably the most electorally successful radical politician in U.S. history. Rep-

resenting East Harlem when it was Italian-American, Puerto Rican and Black, from 1938-52, Marcantonio supported Puerto Rican independence, introduced major civil rights legislation, served as attorney for W.E.B. DuBois and Pedro Albizu Campos and cast the sole vote against the Korean War.

Responses to our message

On Columbus Day weekend, a well-timed press release got IAMUS prominent interviews and op-ed's in daily newspapers and six radio and television appearances, on talk shows and news programs. We got three kinds of responses. At least thirty people, most identifying themselves as Italian-Americans, called to vent rage at us and say we were—guess what—traitors, and a disgrace to the Italian people. This points out the uneven penetration of anti-Columbus educational work; most of these folks had never had in their face before the *Daily News* article on IAMUS. Some were more overtly racist and vicious than others, but almost all made the quintessential eurocentric argument: only Europeans had culture, Indians were savages (and, by the way, so were Africans), so Columbus and "we" did them a favor.

IAMUS received the warmest support and welcome as allies from African Americans, who seem to be quite united in their condemnation of Columbus. One older male volunteer at WLIB, a Black-owned radio station, warmly shook our hands after a brief spot, saying "I remember Congressman Marcantonio and I'm so glad you people are doing this and keeping that tradition alive." More than non-Italian whites, Black people were sensitive to our conflicted feelings and worries about our families' reactions as we publicly condemned a tradition important to our ethnic group. Blacks also had questions and challenges: Are you real? Do you have a base? Are you willing to talk about why we can't walk around in some Italian-American neighborhoods?

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Since the free media coverage and a *Nation* ad appeared, we've also received over a hundred positive responses from Italian-Americans around the country, and have connected with a kindred group, Italian-Americans Against Columbus, on the West Coast. Dozens more teachers, professors and parents have requested information about Italian-American history.

One Italian-American transit worker from Brooklyn called in to a radio talk show:

In my yard, half of the guys are West Indian, and the other half are Italian-American. We really try to get along and mostly we do get along. But there are some things that we never talk about and we should talk about them. So, when I saw your op-ed article, I went out at lunch time and xeroxed 100 copies. Some of the Italian guys didn't wanna talk about it, but eventually we had everybody talking about the article and about what they thought of Columbus and what he meant to different groups.

As this worker knew, so-called friendships and alliances between whites and people of color will never become principled relationships unless issues of white domination and the resistance to it are openly raised and struggled out.

Italian-American and progressive

For good reason, our political tradition doesn't much favor organizing around European ethnic identities, unless there's a real issue of national oppression involved, as with the Irish struggle against Britain. IAMUS was founded explicitly to support demands advanced by people of color around a specific occasion, thereby breaking the white united front. Its founding core never expected that it would be big or that it could convince hardened racists to change. At first we didn't even count on it lasting beyond October 12, 1992.

Most of the IAMUS founding core are consciously progressive; some have been consistent activists as gays, socialists or anti-imperialists while a few have been inactive for quite a while. Others work with Black or Latino intellectuals who have influenced

their orientation, while for some, teaching inner-city children of color has been a radicalizing experience. A majority come from working class backgrounds, but have attended college and now occupy middle-strata jobs. The founding core includes a hospital clerical worker, a social worker, two educators, a policy analyst, a communications specialist, a medical writer and a stand-up comic. After the media exposure, we found dozens more people—some long-time left activists who had never acted as Italian-Americans and some folks who had never been activists—saying, "I'm sick of feeling ashamed about being Italian-American; I want to fight prejudice and injustice as an Italian-American."

Some of this response has to do with ethnic particularities too complex to explore here: the pervasiveness of stereotyping, the underdevelopment of a cosmopolitan intellectual strata. Italian-American traditions of resistance are documented inadequately, and people from other backgrounds know more about them than Italian-Americans do. This is a situation that IAMUS will try to change as resources permit, by doing research and producing materials and curricula for elementary and high school; or by calling out politicians who try to appeal to Italian-Americans as a conservative monolith.

But more broadly, being "white" isn't a very encompassing basis for an identity, since it means nothing more than "someone who gets to dominate non-whites." As the Jamaican Marxist Stuart Hall explains, identity and community are not givens, they are things that people create. Many people of European descent feel the need to be rooted historically. Socialists can help them reclaim the resistance traditions of their foremothers and forefathers while rejecting racist aspects of their upbringing and heritage. In that sense, there is some modest role for groups like IAMUS in the overall struggle against white supremacist bourgeois rule. ■

For an in-depth, progressive look at the history and culture of Italian-Americans, see "Italian-Americans and the Columbus Hype," by Juliet Ucelli and Gilbert Fagiani, School Voices, Winter, 1991. Call (212) 274-1324 or send \$1.00 to School Voices, 79 Leonard St., NY, NY 10013.

Note from Catalyst Project on this piece:

We recognize that this article has some limitations and shortcomings, most particularly in the way that it speaks about Jewish people as all white (i.e. all being of Central/Eastern European ancestry or Ashkenazi descent). This assumption is incorrect and invisibilizes the experiences of Jews of color, including many Jews of Mizrahi (Middle Eastern, North African, and Asian) or Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) ancestry. However, in its analysis of the process of becoming white for Jews of Central/Eastern European ancestry, we felt this article was useful and wanted to include it. So please read it with the recognition that this analysis can only refer to a certain part of the Jewish community and experience, that of Jews of Ashkenazi descent.