Political myth: the political uses of history, tradition and memory

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NOTE

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The Columbus Quincentennial as a Contested Commemoration
The contested nature of commemorative process is illustrated by an examination of the Columbus Quincentennial of 1992. The Columbus Quincentennial demonstrated that the politics of commemoration has the potential to create a fundamental reshaping of established collective memory and traditions. The dynamic interrelationship between collective memory, tradition and commemoration in the success of a political myth is well illustrated by the way the commemoration of the Columbus Quincentennial was challenged. Columbus and the 'discovery' of the 'New World' was prominent in American collective memory as an allegorical symbol of the United States since the nineteenth century. As an allegorical symbol, Columbus had personified the virtues of American civilisation, especially the values of individualism, opportunity and progress. Such normative values were celebrated through a commemorative process that transformed the Columbus tradition into a self-celebratory myth of American virtues. The politics of the Columbus Quincentennial process fundamentally reshaped both Columbus as represented in collective memory and the Columbus tradition itself. In turn, such politics will reframe the way Columbus is communicated in the future. The example therefore demonstrates the often contradictory interrelationships of collective memory, tradition and commemoration which lie at the heart of the continuing dynamism of political myth.
Second, the Columbus Quincentennial commemoration illustrates that the politics of commemoration can often change the structure and meaning of the commemorative process itself. The commemorative narrative, that focuses on Columbus' voyage and landfall in 12th October 1492, had meaning by being embedded in the master commemorative narrative of the virtues of American civilisation, centred on triumphant individualism, boundless opportunity and limitless progress. The emergence of a counter-memory in 1992 challenged not only the normative meanings given to the events of October 12th, but challenged the symbolic significance of the whole event itself. In challenging the master commemorative the opposition to the Columbus Quincentennial was not just engaging in symbolic struggle to control the specific representation of the past, but were mounting a potential challenge to the legitimacy of the political elite itself; the 'official' custodians of Columbus' legacy. Control over the commemorative process is therefore an indicator of the capacity of different groups to communicate their norms, values, interests and legitimacy claims.

The Columbus Quincentennial commemoration of 1992 was a contested anniversary not just in the United States but throughout the Americas. The traditional Columbus Day Parade held on the 12th October in Denver1 was cancelled because of opposition from the American Indian Movement. In Spain a monument to the victims of Spanish colonialism was unveiled near Cadiz. In Genoa, Columbus' birthplace,

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1 Denver is significant to the development of the Columbus Myth in that it was the first city in the United States to mount an annual Columbus Day Parade.
20,000 people marched in protest against Columbus celebrations. In Mexico City indigenous peoples from all over Latin America held a counter-celebration of 'indigenous dignity and native consciousness.' Columbus became the focus not only for long-standing historic grievances but for questioning the nature of 'progress' in the late twentieth century. For many, what was being celebrated so insensitively was not the 'discovery' of the New World but the "violent intrusion of Europe into America." Such a position directly challenged the very basis of the American master commemorative narrative.

The main beneficiary of the 'intrusion of Europe' has been the United States and it is here that the Columbus tradition had its deepest roots. Columbus came to personify the belief system that underlay the American faith in unlimited progress. In an ironic twist, what became contested was the viability of late twentieth century American capitalism. The Columbus myth was subject to contest because the cluster of largely nineteenth century values embodied in it were out of step with the realities of modern American society. Under contest, however, was not only the nature of American society but the nature of modernity itself. The political stakes in this contest were potentially high: control over one of the principal legitimating myths underpinning American society for 200 years.

To illustrate the depth of the assault on the Columbus Myth it is important to recognise the nature of the legitimating role it played. Throughout most of American history Columbus became the embodiment of the dominant virtues of the time. The Columbus myth was fashioned consciously during the late eighteenth

and nineteenth Centuries to meet the needs of an acquisitive frontier society. To nineteenth Century Americans Columbus was presented as, “the quintessence of the individual pioneer rolling back the frontier” or as Robert Hughes put it, “to Europeans and white Americans in 1892, he was Manifest Destiny in tights.” It is as a national icon that, “the potent and self-celebratory myths which make up the national image and from which derive the ‘American dream’” were crystallised around Columbus. A challenge to Columbus was therefore a challenge to the ‘American dream’ and it was the very nature of this ‘dream’ that was being contested in 1992.

The Columbus Myth and the symbolic significance of 1492 were well advanced before Columbus was elevated to the status of a national icon, embodying all the virtues of American civilisation. Following the American Revolution the young Republic had appropriated Columbus, “to give America a historic sense of mission,” and to help define their national identity. By the time of the Tercentenary of 1792, “Columbia was firmly fixed as the allegorical symbol of the United States.”

As Americans were still ambivalent about their English heritage, Columbus had the

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5 Murray, N op cit.
6 As early as 1552 the Spanish historian Fransisco Lopez de Gomara referred to Columbus’ journey as “the greatest event since the creation of the world, excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it.” Quoted by Sale, K. The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1991, p.3. Sale shows how this view has largely persisted in the 3,271 articles and books published about Columbus between 1880 and 1985.
8 Columbus embodied the pioneer spirit as well as “the necessary virtues of perseverance, courage, vision, sagacity, and heroism.” Sale op cit, p.334.
9 Ibid, p.340. In 1784 King’s College New York changed its name to Columbia; during 1785-86 the coins struck for the Confederation had the allegorical female figure of Columbia on them, and in 1791 it was decided to situate the new national capital in the Territory of Columbia.
added advantage of being un-English. Columbus also appeared to have escaped the tyranny of the Old World and therefore to have started the process towards liberty. “He was the solitary individual who challenged the unknown sea, as triumphant Americans contemplated the dangers and promise of their own wilderness frontier.”

The conquest of their own frontier firmly entrenched the Columbus myth during the nineteenth century. The groundwork for his increased stature in the nineteenth century emanated from Washington Irving’s extremely popular History of The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus (1828). As Kirkpatrick Sale points out, Irving created an essentially fictional hero, a hero who “appealed unashamedly to America’s self-image as promoters of civilisation.” These sentiments were expressed on the Four Hundredth Anniversary by President Benjamin Harrison; “Columbus stood in his age as the pioneer of progress and enlightenment,” and in F. J. Turner’s words; “since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the new world America has been another name for opportunity.” The same theme underlay the Columbian Exposition which had a belated opening in Chicago in May 1893. The exposition was “intended as an extravagant symbol of national unity” as well as an opportunity to display America’s industrial expertise. The exposition was therefore, “more than a commemoration of the past; it was also the exclamation

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11 Sale op cit, p. 344.
13 Quoted by Wilford, J.N. op cit, p.9.
15 The Chicago Exposition “attracted nearly 24 million visitors in a nation of 63 million people, the largest crowd for any single event in the history of the world at that point.” Sale op cit, p. 353.
16 Armitage, D. op cit, p. 54.
of a future that self-confident Americans were eager to shape and enjoy." The Four Hundredth Anniversary was closely associated with the American frontier experience in Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous speech on *The Frontier in American History* which was delivered to the American Historical Association (1893) as part of the Chicago Exposition. What Columbus had begun the Americans had completed: the continent had been conquered. Turner stated that, “four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

In addition, Turner’s portrayal of Columbus as the personification of American virtues and opportunities meant that by 1892 Columbus had become “the official national deity.” The process towards deification was also promoted by public statuary and geographic place names as well as by the Knights of Columbus (founded 1882) who sought Columbus’ canonisation. In this they had the support of Pope Pius IX but there was some resistance to the proposal within America itself. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Columbus became something of an

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17 Wilford, J.N. *op cit.*, pp. 9-10.
18 This mood was evoked in Antonin Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* which had been commissioned for the Chicago Exposition.
19 Turner F.J. *op cit.*, p. 18
21 By the time of the Quatercentennial there were 28 major public monuments to Columbus in the United States. None have been added since then in the U.S. but there are a total of 64 Columbuses in the world today, the one in Barcelona being the biggest. Hughes, R. *Barcelona*, Harvill, London, 1992, p. 365. A large 95 metre, 500 tonne bronze statue for Miami designed by Zurab Tsereli for the Quincentennial (and three quarters finished) has been abandoned because of public controversy. *Plush, V. "Columbus: The Myth of the Hero Revised,"”* *24 Hours*, Oct. 1992, pp.56-57.
22 "In the United States ... he is honoured with more place names of all kinds - cities, counties, towns, rivers, colleges, parks, streets ... - than any other figure in American history save Washington". *Sale, K, op cit.*, p.5. He has also given his name to “one nation (Columbia), one national capital (Colombo, Sri Lanka) and one major province (British Columbia)”. *ibid*, p. 360.
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ethnic hero, first to the Irish Catholic immigrants and later to Italian immigrants who found in Columbus an identity shared with the larger American community\(^23\). Hostility towards Italian migrants led to opposition to making Columbus Day a national holiday. However, it did not stop the Italian community from sponsoring a memorial to Columbus that was unveiled on October 12th 1892 in Central Park New York. While purposes were perhaps different, the acceptance of Columbus as an embodiment of the New World was generally accepted.

There had been little dissension in the nineteenth century to celebrating Columbus as the personification of the pioneer spirit that made America great. "Writers and orators of the 19th Century ascribed to Columbus all the human virtues that were most prized in that time of geographic and industrial expansion, heady optimism, and unquestioning belief in progress as a dynamic of history."\(^24\) On the other hand, opposition to Columbus in the Quincentennial year questioned the very nature and legitimating role of the Columbus Myth. As Barbara Ransby stated, "it is a myth which celebrates imperial conquest, male supremacy and the triumph of military might as necessary components of progress and civilisation."\(^25\)

Moreover, Columbus was accused of further crimes including 'genocide' and 'ecocide'. The charge of genocide levelled against Columbus\(^26\) came from indigenous

\(^23\) Not all Americans looked to Columbus as the spiritual founder of America. Beginning in the 1870's there was some enthusiasm for a Norse, Leif Eriksson, as opposed to an Italian founder. Michael Kammen outlines this movement including the Kensington Rune Stone hoax that was designed to divert attention away from the 400th Anniversary. Kammen, M. Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of American Culture, op cit, pp.242-43.

\(^24\) Wilford, J.N. op cit, p. 8.


\(^26\) Criticism of the barbaric treatment of the indigenous people of the new world began with Antonio de Moesesinos in 1511 and was well documented in Bartolome de Las Casas' Brief History of the Destruction
peoples throughout the Americas to focus attention on their plight during the 
Quincentennial. Wayne Ellwood claimed up to ninety per cent of the indigenous 
population were wiped out within one hundred and fifty years of Columbus’ arrival. 
Ellwood called it, “the greatest demographic collapse in the history of the planet and 
the proportional equivalent of nearly half a billion people today.” Somewhat 
optimistically Ronald Wright, who has studied indigenous peoples in the Americas, 

The 500-year-old tide of conquest has begun to turn .... We now recognise that the people 
indigenous to this hemisphere have rights, that their cultures are still viable and valuable and 
that they have a right to continue their way of life.”

The plight of indigenous peoples is closely tied to their habitat drawing attention to 
environmental destruction in the Americas. Ecologically conscious critics of the 
Quincentennial charged that Columbus left a legacy of ‘ecocide’. The imposition of a 
European geography’ on the New World was never questioned by President Andrew 
Jackson who stated,

What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand 
savages to our extensive republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms ... filled 
with the blessings of liberty, civilisation, and religion.

of the Indies, Las Cassas’ work was translated into English in the late 16th Century and used as anti-
Spanish propaganda for approximately 200 years. Las Cassas’ campaign against the enslavement of 
Indians was successful with the 1530 Royal Decree, but this did not stop the increased importation of 
negro slaves. See Elliot, J.H. Imperial Spain 1469-1716, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp. 73-
75.

28 Ellwood, W. ‘Hidden History : Columbus & the Colonial Legacy’, New Internationalist, No. 226, 
Dec. 1991, p. 6. The people Columbus found in the Caribbean totally disappeared within fifty years of 
his arrival. Mexico had had a population of approximately 25 million in 1519 when the conquest began, 
with only 2 million remaining by 1605. In the Central Andes a population of 6 million in 1525 was 
reduced to 1.5 million in 1561. From Carlos Fuentes, ‘Reborn from Catastrophe,’ Guardian Weekly, 18th 
29 Wright, R. Quoted by Serrill op cit
30 Quoted by Ransby, B. op cit, p. 81.
Such views are obviously anathema to the more environmentally aware population of today. Such views are also counter to the direction historical scholarship has taken in the last two decades.

Conscious of the political sensitivity of the celebrations, the Columbus myth was refashioned for the Quincentennial. Columbus was no longer the 'discoverer of' but now has an 'encounter with' the new world. Emphasis also shifted from conquest to such euphemistic expressions as, 'a five hundred year dialogue'. One result of this approach was the politically and diplomatically correct National Gallery exhibition. Simon Schama took the gallery to task for its "pre-emptive prudence", in taking both Columbus and history itself out of the exhibition title, "Circa 1492". In a biting critique Schama noted that, "Columbus's conspicuous banishment from the exhibition exemplifies the kind of approach that is willing to sacrifice the consideration of historical agency to a kind of milquetoast universalism."31

Critics who viewed the Quincentennial from a post-colonial perspective saw the celebration of Columbus as 'discoverer' and coloniser as quite inappropriate in the late twentieth century. To Hans Koning,32

The year 1492 is not only the year of Columbus' landfall, it is more or less the starting shot of a war which Europe and its white outposts have waged on the rest of the world until quite recently and, in the judgement of many, are still waging economically.33

31 Schama, S. 'They All Laughed at Christopher Columbus', The New Republic, Jan. 6 & 13, 1992, p. 33.
32 Hans Koning’s study, Columbus: His Enterprise was published during the American Bicentennial year (1976) and attempted to redress the idealisation of Columbus. Koning established the Columbus in Context group to counter the official celebrations for the Quincentennial.
33 Koning, H. ‘Scouge of America,’ Guardian Weekly, 28/7/91.
The international commemoration of the Quincentennial was therefore a reminder of continuing European hegemony. It was Columbus who brought European values and culture to the new world. The ‘opening’ of the new world,

enabled the society of the European subcontinent to expand beyond its borders in a fashion unprecedented in the history of the world; and to come today to dominate virtually every other society it touches, Westernizing the great bulk of humanity, imposing its institutions and ideas, its languages and culture, its technologies and economy, around the earth.\textsuperscript{34}

To those who contested the Quincentennial, Columbus was a symbol of exploitation. Hazel Waters placed the Columbian Quincentennial within the broader context of late twentieth century capitalism and the corporate need for unifying symbols. Waters saw the Columbus Myth being used to re-shape an ideology of progress.

Whereas Europe’s medieval kings took legitimacy and authority from God’s ordinance, the mesh of supra-national and super-powers and transnational conglomerates who arrange our destinies today need a more sophisticated array of techniques to proclaim the inevitability of current hierarchies of power and the rightfulness of their version of progress.\textsuperscript{35}

However, “with their reaffirmation of past mythologies what the Columbus celebrations have done is to expose the divisions in American society and polarise the argument about its nature.”\textsuperscript{36} Hence the Quincentennial celebrations took on a polemical atmosphere.

The conflict over the Columbus Myth was very much part of the current debate in the United States over the nature of American society. As Robert Hughes stated in his essay, \textit{The Fraying of America}, “America is a construction of mind, not of race or inherited class or ancestral territory .... America is a collective act of the

\textsuperscript{34} Sale, K. \textit{op cit}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{36} Murray, N. \textit{op cit}, p.62.
imagination whose making never ends.\textsuperscript{37} The traditional construction, exemplified by Columbus, was no longer adequate as for many he had become a "symbol of division, exploitation and oppression."\textsuperscript{38} Also, as the Latin American Novelist Carlos Fuentes noted, "[America] has to come to terms with a new kind of diversity with which it did not cope in the past. It has not only a white history, it also has a black history and an Indian history and a Hispanic history."\textsuperscript{39} However, the idea that a nation can have multiple perspectives on its past was strongly attacked. As Murray responded, "with the 'evil empire' in ruins, the new life-and-death struggle for all patriotic Americans lies within in own classrooms and campuses."\textsuperscript{40} Consequently, the struggle to control the Columbus Myth and its transmission to the next generation was part of the never ending process of 'imagining America'.\textsuperscript{41}

By contesting the official agenda the counter-quincentennial movement challenged the current custodians of the Columbus Myth. This was significant in a presidential election year\textsuperscript{42} as "neither political party will want to disturb the layers of mystification and amnesia spun round the national consciousness."\textsuperscript{43} However the Columbus Myth had been unravelling for some time. And the process was quickened

\textsuperscript{37} Hughes, R. \textit{op cit}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{38} Plush, V. \textit{op cit}, p.59.
\textsuperscript{39} Fuentes, C. 'Latin Americans Know That History is Alive and Never Assimilated', \textit{24 Hours}, October 1992, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{40} Murray, N. \textit{op cit}, p. 57
\textsuperscript{41} It is also a process that Murray argues was being won by conservative forces because of their ability to equate demands for multiculturalism with political correctness which was construed in the media as the 'new McCarthyism'. Murray also argued that conservative success had been aided because the more progressive forces were, "fragmented by the all-consuming politics of identity into abstract and apolitical categories of 'culture' and oppression, and paralysed by a fixation on texts, language, and the self, and the search for 'self-esteem'" \textit{ibid} p. 38.
\textsuperscript{42} The Commission's Chairman, John Goudie was forced to resign over the letting of contracts in December 1990 and in the process lost important corporate sponsorship. As Goudie was a prominent Miami Republican and fund-raiser the Republican Party distanced itself from the Commission after his resignation
\textsuperscript{43} Murray, N. \textit{op cit}, p. 51.
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by the problems surrounding the Christopher Columbus Quincentennial Commission formed by President Reagan in 1985.\textsuperscript{44} Opposition to celebrations also came from the Protestant National Council of Churches, which declared in May 1990 that the Quincentennial should be, "a year of mourning: ... for the descendants of the survivors of the subsequent invasion, genocide, slavery, ecocide and the exploitation of the land, a celebration is not an appropriate observance of this anniversary."\textsuperscript{45} The National Council of Catholic Bishops merely voted that the encounter between Columbus and indigenous peoples was "harsh and painful". The continuing questioning of the meaning of the Columbus Myth to modern American society makes Columbus Day likely to be a contested anniversary well into the future.

It needs to be emphasised, from this example of commemorative process, that the actual act of commemoration may only present an illusion of consensus. Where political myth is able to promote a broad framework for containing and synthesising multiple commemorative narratives and the political elite can align its own program with the master commemorative narrative, then there will be general consensus about the meaning of the symbolic events being commemorated. It may have been achieved in the 1892 Columbus commemorations. A fundamental challenge to the master commemorative narrative, however, weakens the capacity of a political myth to negotiate and synthesise different interpretations of a symbolically significant event. Such was the case in 1992 when the legitimacy of the Columbus political myth itself

\textsuperscript{44}As early as August 1988 when George Bush was nominated as the Republican Party’s Presidential candidate, the Quincentennial celebrations were seen as a vehicle for a second term. "In an orgy of public patriotism surrounding the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial celebrations, it was noted, George Bush would be at the helm of state and, basking in the Columbian afterglow, would move to certain victory at the Presidential elections three weeks later on Tuesday 3 November 1992." Plush, V. op cit, p. 59.
was challenged. The Columbus Quincentennial commemoration therefore provides an excellent example that illustrates the close interrelationship between collective memory, tradition and commemoration, and how the meaning of a political myth is itself shaped by the commemorative process.

45 Quoted by Plush, V. *ibid*, p. 58