

Columbus Meets Evita and Gets Carried Away

William J. Connell (October 13, 2013)



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On a recent trip to Argentina I witnessed an astonishing spectacle involving Christopher Columbus. Buenos Aires is a beautiful city, with impressive avenues and plazas and splendid buildings and monuments. But in the park behind the Presidential Palace there was a grand statue of Christopher Columbus that was lying on its back on the ground. Yellow tape was wrapped around the statue's jaw, so it appeared Columbus was suffering from a toothache.

The statue had been removed from its pedestal by order of President Cristina Fernandez Kirchner, whose windows look out on the monument. In the spring of this year she announced her intention to move it 200 miles away, to a provincial capital, and to replace it with a statue of Juana Azurduy, a female leader of the indigenous population against the Spaniards in the nineteenth century.

Battling over the monument But the Columbus monument is an important part of the history of



Buenos Aires. Carved in Italy over a period of 11 years by the sculptor Arnaldo Zocchi, the statue was financed by the Italian community of Argentina, where more than 50 % of the population is of Italian ancestry. Carved from Carrara marble, boasting a rich allegorical pedestal, the statue has been the principal focus in the park surrounding the Presidential Palace ever since its inauguration in 1921. In aesthetic terms the Buenos Aires monument easily surpasses New York's Columbus Circle monument, which only last year was nicely restored thanks to the experiential art project of Tatzu Nishi.

When President Fernandez Kirchner announced her plan, there were protests from the large Italian community of Argentina and also from the Mayor of Buenos Aires. Marchers circled the statue bearing Italian flags and banners with the slogan "COLON NO SE MUEVE." The Mayor argued that the monument had been a gift to Buenos Aires and was therefore the property of the city, not the Federal government, and he won an injunction forbidding the statue's removal. Unfazed, the President announced that the statue was in need of "restoration" and would therefore be taken down all the same. Scaffolding went up, a crane arrived, and Columbus was removed from his perch. He now lies flat on his back. A judge determined that restoring the statue was within the government's purview.

Columbus politics

What prompted this assault on a popular and aesthetically pleasing monument in central Buenos Aires? The answer has mostly to do with the present political predicament of Fernandez Kirchner. Recently she lost the parliamentary majority that would have permitted her to amend the constitution so that she could run for office again. As a politician, she has built a base of support among Argentina's lower classes, especially among people of indigenous extraction, including the Bolivian immigrants who comprise a large share of the manual labor force. For Kirchner, whose economic policies have alienated much of Argentina's bourgeoisie, it makes a certain amount of sense to rally her strongest supporters in what is likely to be her last year in power. In recent times it was Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who set the example by successfully mobilizing this part of his country's population to win election after fanning racial and class resentment against better-off citizens who were largely of Argentina's bourgeoisie, it makes a certain amount of sense to rally her strongest supporters in what is likely to be her last year in power. In recent times it was Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who set the example by successfully mobilizing this part of his country's population to win election after fanning racial and class resentment against better-off citizens who were largely of European (especially Spanish and Italian) extraction.

El Día de la Raza

That Columbus became a political target was no accident. Unfortunately for Columbus's memory in Latin America, in many countries the day of his first landing in the New World was officially named and celebrated as El Día de la Raza—"The Day of the Race." Unlike Columbus Day celebrations in the United States, which were intended as a way of mitigating prejudice against recent arrivals, in Latin America an overtly racist ideology stood at the fore of the way Columbus was remembered. Moreover, by the time of the 500th anniversary commemorations in 1992, historians had come up with a more accurate picture of the human costs that followed from the first substantial contact between the two hemispheres. Although Columbus can be said to have "caused" them, it is hard to claim that he was morally responsible. Still, he became an easy symbolic target, much as in the United States. In 2004, when a bronze statue of Columbus was destroyed in Caracas by followers of Chavez, "El Día de la Raza" was transformed into the "Fiesta de la Resistencia Indígena."

Another "Evita"?

In Argentina the transfer of the Columbus statue from Buenos Aires and its replacement with Juana Azurduy is shaping up as something like a signature project of the Kirchner presidency. Astonishing as it may sound, the man who has been appointed "conservator" to restore the Columbus statue was the same man who forty years earlier had been in charge of restoring the embalmed corpse of Eva Peron before its final burial in 1974. Another "Evita" is what Fernandez Kirchner seems to wish to become – presumably minus the mummification. And, sure enough, after looking over the now recumbent statue, the restorer declared he had found tiny "fissures" in the Zocchi statue. He said this was owing to the statue's being sited in Buenos Aires and recommended it be moved to a less humid area. Many of the citizens of Buenos Aires continue to oppose the presidential project. There is no shortage of plazas and parks in the city that might give Juana Azurduy a prominent home. It



would be a shame for Buenos Aires to lose its beautiful and historic Columbus monument as a consequence of this political game of chess.

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